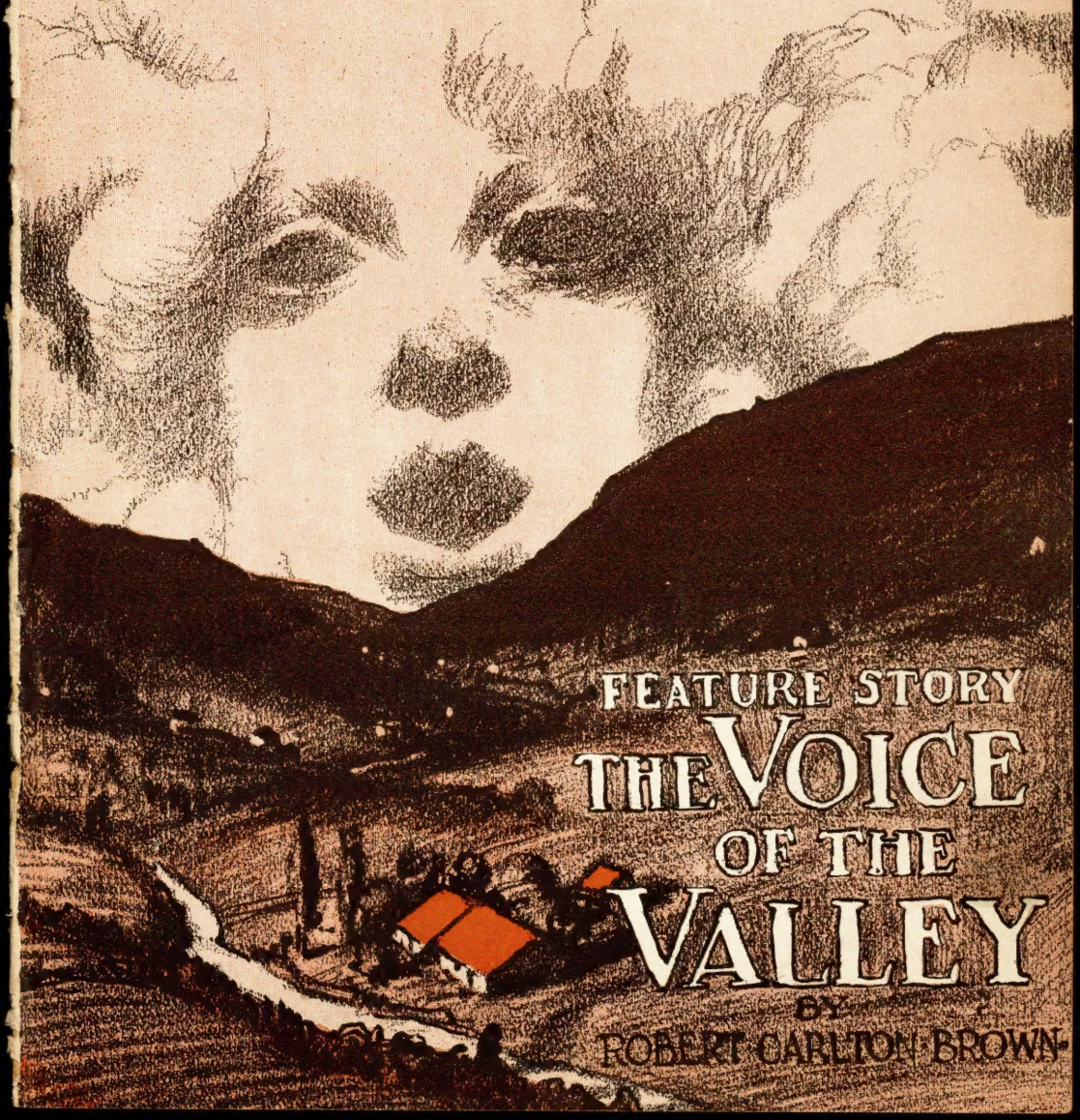
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

VOL. 1. No. 11. APRIL 15, 1918 PRICE 10 CENTS



FEATURE STORY

THE VOICE OF THE VALLEY

BY

ROBERT CARLTON BROWN

Watch for "THE SIGN OF THE SEVEN SHARKS," Out in Our Next Number

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Vol. I APRIL 15, 1918. No. 11

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Published Twice a Month by

FRANK TOUSEY, Publisher

168 West 23d Street, New York

N. Hastings Wolff, Pres.
M. N. Wolff, Vice-Pres.
Charles W. Hastings, Treas.
Charles E. Nylander, Sec.

LU. SENARENS, Editor

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SUBSCRIPTION PRICE:

Domestic, Single Copy	10 Cents
Domestic, Yearly	$2.50
Canada	$2.75
Foreign	$3.00

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The Voice of the Valley

A STRANGE STORY OF CLAIRVOYANCE

By ROBERT CARLTON BROWN

CHAPTER ONE

THE MYSTIC CALL

THE RIDGE was tangled with purple daisies, goldenrod, creeping Johnny and black-eyed Susans. It blinked lazily under an August sun. A mile east swept the Hudson River and civilization, two miles west a thriving city of factories spelled industry in a dozen different ways; but The Ridge, even with a number of houses intruding their faultlessly groomed gardens into the midst of its charming disorder, continued its state of lethargy. A valley at its feet, all mauve and yellow, veiled with a slight haze, bordered fantastically with a silver river and fringed with high hills, gave an added charm of mystery to its somnolence.

A taxicab bowled down Edgewater Road, and, turning into a grass-grown lane, stopped in front of a tiny house perched on the topmost crest of The Ridge and nearly smothered with wild honeysuckle. Its occupants—a young girl and a middle-aged woman—alighted, while a trim-appearing maid ran down the house-steps to greet them.

The woman followed the maid into the house; but the girl stopped, evidently to enjoy the panorama spread out before her. She was tall and slender, and as she peered dreamily into the valley, swaying slightly with the wind, she seemed a bit frail. Suddenly, with a breathless little gasp, she threw out her arms in a mock gesture of despair and rushed into the house.

"Isn't money just the nicest thing in the world, auntie?" she cried excitedly, rolling her gloves into a ball and tossing them with her hat onto a side-table.

"It isn't half bad," her aunt conceded cautiously; "but, of course——" She stopped to extricate a knitting-needle that had imbedded itself in the luggage.

"Of course," Hester echoed laughingly.

"Of course, money is not the nicest thing in the world," her aunt continued, having retrieved the needle and re-

placed it in a bundle of war socks; "health, honor, happiness——"

"All begin with H," Hester teased. "You fraud! You take to taxis, flowers, music, travel, breakfasts in bed and all the etceteras that go with money just as naturally as a duck takes to water. Now, don't you boast any plebeian blood; you know you are an aristocrat to your very finger-tips, which are long and slender and very lovely."

Gaily, quickly, with the inconsequent movements of a bird, Hester was darting about the living-room, stopping with due respect before an old piece of carved wood, fingering lovingly a rare bit of tapestry, pausing in front of a colorful painting, striking a chord on a Steinway Grand, or running a discordant arpeggio on the sagging strings of an ancient harp. Now she ran across the room, seized the fingers she had praised, and kissed them happily.

"I never dreamed so many things could be gathered into one room and look as though they had always been there," she cried; "and it's yours and mine, auntie, for one long year. I feel like the little old woman who had her petticoats cut off. I can hardly believe I am I."

"I wonder that any one could ever have let out a place like this, even to such nice people as we are," her aunt observed.

"Pooh! An artist—bored, not too much money—wants a change. Presto, change-o! He takes our money, we take his home—just like that," Hester returned airily. "I can always solve practical problems. What is it? What's the matter?" she cried sharply, startled.

Miss Carstairs had jumped to her feet abruptly.

"Did you hear it?" she cried, a strained look in her face, as though she were listening to a distant call.

"I hear the croaking of frogs and the chirping of crickets," Hester answered lightly. "You really frightened me, auntie: I thought something had happened. Isn't tea almost ready, Betty?" She turned to the maid who had entered the room.

"I was just bringing it, Miss Hester."

"It is not frogs or crickets that are calling." Miss Carstairs' voice was agitated.

"It might be the hoot of an owl," Betty ventured. "There do be many hereabouts. Last Sunday I was strollin' in the woods and I saw no less than three. One was white, with gray ear-muffs; one was black, with pink——"

"It was not the cry of an owl," Miss Carstairs interrupted.

"It was probably somebody talking in the distance, or a baby crying. Sounds travel so oddly in the country," Hester decided. "Betty, put the tea-things on this duck of a table, while I run out for a cluster of that wild honeysuckle I saw clambering all over the house."

"It was not a human cry," Miss Carstairs insisted.

"Maybe 'twas a banshee," whispered Betty, crossing herself, her face paling.

"Stuff and nonsense," scoffed Hester from the open door. "Auntie, do come here and see the view we get from our front door. Was there ever such a valley anywhere else in the world? We never were in Italy; but doesn't it look just like your dreams of that romantic place?" She had gathered an armful of the fragrant honeysuckle, and was taking deep sniffs of its sweetness.

"It is wonderful and awful," Miss Carstairs murmured.

"Why awful?" demanded Hester.

"Don't you hear it?" Miss Carstairs smiled gently. "That's the call—the call of the valley—and it is trying to say something."

"I think it says, 'Come, play with me; chase butterflies and sip honey-dew.'" laughed Hester.

Miss Carstairs shivered as though she were chilled. She looked keenly at Hester.

"I have it," she said quietly. "'Beware!' that's its message."

Hester felt a momentary creepiness in her spinal column, which was quickly dissipated, however, when Betty's voice crooned invitingly:

"Hot cinnamon crullers."

"Crullers, auntie; hot and sprinkled with cinnamon!" Hester exulted, her healthy appetite crushing morbid fancies. "Come, I'll eat three to your every one," she challenged, catching her aunt about the waist and waltzing her back into the big living-room.

Miss Carstairs, having solved the riddle of the mystic call, was in a compliant and complaisant mood. Whatever fortune or misfortune the future might bring, forewarned was to be forearmed, she argued, and allowed herself to indulge in round after round of tea and crullers.

Betty had made three replenishing trips, when Hester suddenly cried:

"Auntie, what do you think this all reminds me of?"

"The time you were a waitress in Denver."

"Exactly; and doesn't it all seem like a fairy-story—my waiting on Mr. Caruthers, just as I waited on a dozen others, whose names I didn't know, and his dying and leaving me all his worldly possessions?"

"Yes; but your lawyer told you that Mr. Caruthers inquired all about you. If he hadn't learned that you were an ex-schoolteacher, broken in health, well-born and quite capable of enjoying his wealth, I am afraid you might still be waiting on tables."

"Probably." Hester smiled and held out a none too plump arm. "How much do you think I have gained in the last two months?"

"About ten pounds," Miss Carstairs hazarded.

"Auntie, you are a mind-reader. Do you know every thought in my head?"

Miss Carstairs laughed.

"Not quite all," she confessed; "those at the back of your brain are quite safe, but those you carry in front are quite transparent."

"Miss Hester, there's an ugly old woman at the back door, who says she is a fortune-teller. What shall I say to her?"

"Shall we ask her in?" Hester turned mischievously to her aunt. "She can read my palm while you study her."

Miss Carstairs nodded.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FORTUNE-TELLER

THE little old woman Betty ushered in was indeed ugly. The dirt of years grimed her wrinkled face and hands; she was hunchbacked and lame; her clothes fitted her illy, but, strange anomaly, they were clean, as though freshly tubbed.

Hester shuddered. The creature was too repulsive to make even fortune-telling desirable; but Miss Carstairs, whose religion was toleration, dropped a piece of silver into the woman's outstretched palm.

"Do you want your fortune told, or the young lady's?" the old woman asked, turning a searching look on Hester and speaking in a pleasing, low voice. She had none of the whine of the ordinary peripatetic soothsayer; indeed, there was a certain dignity about her that caused Miss Carstairs to look at her with new interest.

"Won't you be seated?" she asked kindly, indicating a near-by chair and asking Betty to give her a cup of tea.

With a toss of her head, Betty did as she was bidden. The old woman emptied her cup in two gulps, then turned to Hester with a wheedling smile.

"You have come a long distance," she said, "and you have recently inherited a fortune. You have an interesting future. May I tell it to you?"

Again Hester shuddered; but her youthful curiosity overcame her repugnance to the dreadful-looking creature.

"Do you read the cards, or the palm?" she asked, feeling she could not allow her hands to be touched by the woman's dirty ones.

"Neither; I read the stars and planets. The cards are a pleasant pastime, the palm amusing; it's the stars that fix our destiny irrevocably. You are a favorite of the gods. Let me tell you what they say."

Hester looked at her aunt waveringly. Miss Carstairs nodded.

"Give me your name, birth month and year."

When Hester had complied, the old woman closed her eyes and remained silent for several minutes. Finally she took out a pad of paper and pencil from a prodigious side-pocket and began to make rapid calculations.

"Three—six—nine," she repeated several times, then shook her head and emitted a deep sigh. "The stars are not as kind to you as strangers have been. You are the sport of fortune—one moment on the crest of its wave, the next submerged, gasping for life. I see before you sickness, death, the end. Three—you cannot get away from it; it is a bird of ill-omen."

The woman looked blinkingly at Hester; her ferret-like eyes held a look of malevolence that shook the girl more than her prophesies. Pale and trembling, the girl was near to fainting.

"Three—six—nine; a terrible combination."

"That will do!" cried Miss Carstairs distressfully. She had listened with growing consternation to the old woman's prediction. "You may go. Betty will pay what we owe you; please go quickly."

"I'd pay her with a good dose of tar-and-feathers, that's what I'd pay her, if I had my way," muttered Betty from the crack of the door, where she had been listening. "To go and tell Miss Hester all the terrible things that are coming to her, all in a lump, like as if 'twarn't bad enough to have 'em come without her knowin' of it." And Betty put her ear to the crack again.

"But it's not all bad," the old woman went on composedly. "I see a wedding; you will wed within a year." She turned again blinkingly to Hester. "I see a young man with blond, curly hair; you know him," she chuckled, as Hester's color changed from white to scarlet. "You will be very happy, if—— Much depends on that if. I know of a secret charm——"

"That will do!" Miss Carstairs interrupted indignantly. "Hester, will you run up to my room and get my purse out of the black leather bag Betty carried up?"

When Hester had left the room, Miss Carstairs turned to the old woman.

"I've allowed you to go on," she said, "out of respect for your age and misfortune. You may have a smattering of the occult, but you know nothing of the science of the soul, and when you speak of secret charms, I know you are a charlatan, and I won't have Hester imposed upon."

"Then you don't believe in secret charms?"

"I do not."

"But I do. For instance: What will remove warts? Answer: Steal a piece of meat, take it down in the cellar, and hide it under a barrel or box. In two weeks the warts will have disappeared. Did you ever hear of that?"

"Seems to me I have heard something of the kind; perfectly ridiculous, of course."

"Perhaps. Did you ever try it?"

"No."

"Then you have nothing to say. I have tried it, and it worked. Consequently I believe in charms. I enjoyed your tea. Good-afternoon." The old woman made a deep curtsy and started toward the kitchen-door, through which she had entered.

"But you have not been paid for your reading. Just a moment. Here's Hester."

"I take no pay for my prophecies," the woman returned curtly, and limped from the room.

Quite taken aback, Miss Carstairs stared vacantly at Hester as she rushed into the room.

"Where's the fortune-teller?" she asked.

"Gone; and she refused to take any money for her trouble. I charged her with being an impostor and she retired with considerable dignity. You won't let what she said affect you, one way or another, will you, Hester dear? I am confident she was not a true clairvoyant. I could not feel one vibration that was in tune with her, and all the time she was here I had an uneasy feeling of a far-off voice trying to reach me and warn me of something."

"She fascinated me," Hester shivered. "Her eyes were horrid little things; but I found it quite hard to turn my gaze from them. I think she is real, but wicked."

"What do you think that ugly old woman did when she went through my kitchen?" cried Betty in a voice choked with indignation, rushing into the room.

"What?" chorused Hester and her aunt anxiously.

"Why, she chucked me under the chin, called me 'Honey,' and slammed some silver into my fist. Here it is."

"It's the silver piece I crossed her palm with, when she came into the room," said Miss Carstairs blankly.

"Just wait till I see her some day; I'll chuck it back at her," spluttered Betty.

"I wouldn't," laughed Hester; "keep it and buy a huge box of candy and sweeten the memory of her."

Betty's long face broadened into laughter.

"I'll do it, Miss Hester; but ain't you the jollier, and the old curmudgeon daring to tell you a pack of lies 'bout things you know nothin' 'bout, and won't know for forty or more years yet, the old——"

"Don't forget about the candy," reminded Hester, her eyes twinkling.

Betty retired, chuckling.

Hester went to the bay-window that overlooked the valley and perched herself on its wide ledge.

"I feel we are going to be very happy here, auntie; the indoors is so beautiful and the outdoors so wonderful. Don't you wonder who live in all the near-by houses? They seem to have been just thrown down anywhere, haphazard-like; some border the state road like ourselves, and others border a goose-trail. Nowhere do I see such honeysuckle as ours; but what a profusion of flowers everywhere! Oh, auntie, come here quick! Who is that little old woman scraping a pan at the side of her door?"

Miss Carstairs hurried to the window and stood there a moment in consternation.

"It's the fortune-teller!" she gasped.

"Do—do you suppose she lives there?" stammered Hester unhappily.

"I am afraid she does," her aunt returned, equally unhappy. "I am glad the state road is between us. How plainly we can see her every movement."

"I hope she won't think we are watching her, for I am not going to let her spoil my landscape. I shall just sit in this window every day and look over her," cried Hester defiantly. "What is she doing? Did you see her make that flying leap to catch something? Ugh, how horrid! It's a snake. Didn't she jump quickly for a lame old woman? She's taking it into the house. Well, what do you think of that?"

CHAPTER THREE

MUSHROOMS

"I THINK it is very odd, to say the least," Miss Carstairs returned. "She is certainly a very eccentric person."

"There is something about her that is fascinating in spite of her ugliness. I wonder if she gets it from the snakes she seems to be so interested in. I also wonder what she meant by a secret charm."

"Oh, please don't remember anything she said, Hester; she has, no doubt, a little knowledge of the occult, but she is just at the threshold of the great truth. I must take you to visit an old friend of mine—a philosopher, an earnest theosophist and prophet. He will read your fate scientifically by the stars. He will tell you that there are no such things as secret charms."

"Has he ever read the stars for you, auntie?"

"Yes; five years ago he predicted just what has happened now. At the time, as you know, I was in a public hospital, sick of life and courting death. He came to see me and told me that a very happy life was coming to me in just about five years. It seemed a long time to wait; but it was good medicine, for I believed him and I began to improve from that moment until I was once more on my feet."

"It's very wonderful and strange. I hope he has nice things to say of me," Hester sighed.

"We must go into the city to-morrow; I have a dozen

things to attend to, and I will call up his office. Perhaps he will be able to see us, or, if not, he can arrange a time for consultation," offered Miss Carstairs.

"Lovely, auntie; you always do think of such nice plans to do. How could I get along without you?"

Miss Carstairs smiled, and hoped that she had effaced any worry Hester might have felt over the old woman's prophecy. It was many years since her own youth, but she had not forgotten the time when, at Hester's age, she was wearing a four-leaf clover in her left shoe and singing, "Star bright, star-light, first star I see to-night."

The next morning Hester and her aunt were up early to catch the train, a mile away, for the city. The walk was quite lovely before the heat of the day, and Hester tripled the distance by sudden dashes into the fields they passed to pick daisies and wild asters. They saw a number of Italian women and children carrying something done-up in cloths. One of them, a young boy, accosted Hester.

"Wanta buy da mushrooms?" he asked, smiling shyly and digging a bare toe into the ground. He undid the white cloth he was carrying and showed its creamy contents.

"Mushrooms!" cried Hester eagerly. "Don't they look too good to eat. Isn't it a pity, auntie, we aren't on our way home. I'd take every one he has."

"Do you know the honeysuckle-covered cottage at the very top of The Ridge?" Miss Carstairs asked the boy.

"Sure!" the boy grinned. "I taka da mushrooms to Mr. Sherwood."

"That's the house. Mr. Sherwood doesn't live there now; Miss Hester Carstairs has taken the house. I will pay you for the mushrooms and you deliver them to Betty, the maid."

The boy pocketed his money.

"Sure, I taka da mushrooms to de lady." He nodded in a friendly manner and started up the hill, whistling.

Arrived in town, Hester and Miss Carstairs found so many errands to attend to that it was four o'clock before they even thought to call up Doctor Rue, the theosophist; and then they learned that he was out of the city and would not return until the first of November.

Miss Carstairs was so thoroughly disappointed that Hester had no chance to mourn. Indeed, she took her own disappointment so lightly that Miss Carstairs first stared, then laughed.

"Why, you funny girl," she said; "I don't believe you care whether your stars are read or not."

"I'd care if it got me anywhere," Hester returned; "but as I can't possibly have a reading before November 1st, why worry?"

"Why, indeed! Hester, you are a true philosopher. What shall we do now?"

"How does mushrooms sound?"

"Sounds like home. Think we can make the four-forty-five?"

"Easily; but the mile walk at the end doesn't appeal to me now as it did this morning. Let's be luxurious and go home in a taxi. It's a lovely drive along the Hudson after we leave the ferry, and we will get home in time to freshen up for dinner. Won't it be fun when we have our own wagon? I hope I can take my first lesson tomorrow in driving my own car."

"You will be awfully careful, won't you, Hester? Somehow I am cowardly about your learning to drive a machine." Miss Carstairs spoke anxiously.

"But you don't mind having a spin with any old driver, just so he's a man. You risk your neck gaily. Here's one now; I'll hail him," Hester laughed.

The drive was all that Hester had prophesied. A cool breeze from the Hudson revived their drooping spirits, so that, when they were nearly home, Hester declared she felt as fresh as she had in the morning.

"Oh, look at that dear little Italian boy." She pointed to a youth who was trudging up the hill, with a basket on each arm. He was whistling a martial tune and stepping in time to it. At sight of Hester, he raised his hat with a gallantry that is born nowhere else but under Italian skies. "Why, it's the mushroom boy," she added, bowing and smiling.

"He must belong to the house we just passed. Don't you remember, this morning we saw a number of children playing in front of it? They were all Italians."

"Yes, auntie; what a lot of interesting neighbors we have," she beamed.

"Turn to the right, driver," she directed as they approached the top of the hill.

Betty met them at the door and relieved Miss Carstairs of her wrap.

"My, but your cheeks are pink, Miss Hester!" she cried. "This air's good for you. I was afraid you'd be late, and I've got biscuits for supper."

"Oh, Betty," Hester laughed, "you will spoil me with your flattery and good things." She blew her a kiss.

Betty's eyes beamed. She looked at Hester with the fondness of an old servitor, for in the days of long ago, when the young girl's parents were alive, she had worked in the family. Indeed, when Hester had suddenly fallen heir to a comfortable fortune she sent two telegrams to the two people she held most dear, asking them to come and help her enjoy it. Miss Carstairs, her father's sister, and Betty were the chosen ones.

The maid bustled about the room, picking up Hester's hat from the table, where she had thrown it, gathering up her gloves from a near-by chair and chattering happily about the petty details of the day.

"Why, everything you can think of is brought to the door—chickens, rabbits, eggs, fruit, vegetables, mushrooms. There, I knew it! I talk so much I never can keep a secret. That was to be a surprise," she wailed, and trailed unhappily into the kitchen.

A half-hour later she was again beaming, when she entered the room to anounce dinner.

"You said, Miss Hester, that on account of war times we must have two meatless days, so the mushrooms are the special dish." Her tone was apologetic, for Betty loved nothing better than getting up what she called "Scrumptious meals."

"What could be nicer than creamed mushrooms?" Hester wanted to know, helping herself bountifully. She had pierced one of the delicate morsels, and it was half-way down her mouth when Miss Carstairs suddenly laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"Wait!" she said in a strange, detached tone. "Don't you hear it?"

"Hear what, auntie? Please wait until I take just one mouthful of the mushrooms. I am so hungry, I——"

"Listen!" said Miss Carstairs tensely. Her fingers had closed like a vise around Hester's wrist. "It's saying something."

"What is saying something, auntie? I don't hear anything." Hester's voice held a note of impatience.

"The voice of the valley. It says, 'Don't!' Don't what?" she murmured uneasily. Her face was colorless, her eyes half-closed; her grip on Hester's wrist did not relax, however.

"Please, auntie, let's eat," coaxed Hester; "and look at Betty. She's white as a sheet. You've frightened her." The serving woman leaned against the dining-room door as though for support. Her face was pallid and she seemed too terrified to move.

Suddenly Miss Carstairs opened her eyes wide and stared vacantly into space; then a rush of color suffused her face. The vacant stare left her eyes; a keen, rapier-like glance took its place. She bent it upon Betty, and asked quickly:

"What have you eaten?"

"Mushrooms," said Betty uncertainly. "I'm sick," she gasped, and fell to the floor, writhing in pain.

"Run to the telephone, Hester, and call the nearest doctor. I will give her emetics until he comes. The mushrooms were poisonous."

It was nearly a half-hour when the doctor arrived—a strong, self-reliant woman, who took off her gloves and did heroic work until Betty was out of immediate danger.

"I can't tell you how grateful we are," said Hester feelingly.

"That's all right, my dear; but your aunt really saved the woman's life. Her quick knowledge that she had been poisoned and her prompt action in giving her emetics made my work very simple. How did it happen that you two escaped?"

"It was the voice. It said, 'Don't!'" Miss Carstairs answered quietly.

"The voice?" the doctor repeated, uncomprehending.

"Auntie is a theosophist, and often can hear voices that would never penetrate our ears," Hester eagerly explained.

"It is wonderful," the doctor responded. She turned to Miss Carstairs. "How did you know what 'Don't!' meant?" she asked.

"I didn't know until I saw Betty standing by the door. Then instantly I knew all."

"Wonderful!" the doctor repeated, and took her departure.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MYSTERY

THE next mornng Hester insisted upon preparing breakfast and waiting upon Betty, much to the latter's discomfiture. She grumbled and protested, but had to obey Hester's orders to lie quietly in bed.

"I'm not a bit sick; just a bit light-headed, that's all. If you make me stay in bed, I'll probably get to be bedridden," she groaned.

"Do be good, and stay quiet until the doctor comes," coaxed Hester. "You shall do just as she says."

Miss Carstairs had been equally busy about the house; but, having some spare time before luncheon, she had gone out onto the front porch with her knitting, to work another war sock—her ninth one. She was pledged to do a gross of them.

Here Hester found her. Throwing herself down beside her, Hester clasped her hands back of her neck and looked dreamily out over the valley.

"Auntie," she said, "we've been in such a rush ever since Betty was taken sick, we haven't had a moment's time to think of the cause. Do you suppose those lovely creamy things we told the Italian boy to bring to the house were really toadstools? Or do you think Betty got them somewhere else? We must sift the matter to the bottom as soon as she is better."

"She told me last night that she bought them of the Italian boy. She said they looked lovely and so tempting she ate some when she first cooked them."

"How terrible! Do you suppose any of those Italians we saw with bags had gathered toadstools, too? I thought all Italians could just sense a real mushroom. Suppose the little boy is also ill? There's the doctor." She ran down the steps to greet her.

"Good-morning. How is the patient?" The doctor shook hands briskly.

"Fine; she wanted to get up, but I said you would have to see her first."

"Quite right," the doctor replied, going in.

"There ain't a thing the matter with me," Betty complained.

"I believe it," the doctor smiled.

Betty sat up in surprise.

"I'm going to get up and dress," she hazarded.

"I'll let you," the doctor laughed. She was about to leave the room, when she turned and asked, "Betty, who did you buy your mushrooms from?"

"A little Italian boy, who said his name was Tony, and that he lived near here and sold mushrooms to all the neighbors."

"It is certainly very strange." She turned to Hester and Miss Carstairs, who had followed her to Betty's room. "It happens this morning that I had two other calls in the neighborhood. I spoke of your narrow escape at both places, and at each place they had eaten mushrooms bought of Tony. Tony has sold mushrooms for three years, and you are the first to suffer from them."

"He told me that he was all sold out, except just those I bought. I don't see why ours should have been poisoned and everybody else have good ones out of the same basket."

"Neither do I, Betty. It is too serious a thing to pass over lightly. I hope you will investigate thoroughly." She turned gravely to Miss Carstairs. "Indeed, if either you or your niece wish to go to Tony's house, I will take you now in my machine. I am going past there, and will stop while you make inquiries."

"Poor little kiddie; I know it was no fault of the Italian boy. He has such a sweet face, doctor, and you ought to hear him whistle—just like a bird," cried Hester.

"We all know Tony and love him. That's why the whole thing is a mystery. Tony knows every mushroom that grows."

The doctor stopped in front of a little house that looked as though a sudden gust of wind would blow it over. A number of black-eyed, black-haired children were playing outside. They rushed toward the road when the doctor's machine stopped, and peered curiously through the wire fence that enclosed a large plot of land given over to careful gardening.

"Is Tony home?" the doctor asked, after calling each rosy-cheeked youngster by name.

"Tony, Tony!" the children clamored in chorus. "Doctor Margaret wants you. Hurry up!"

Out of the house came Tony, rushing at full speed down the front path to the boarded gateway. With a spring he cleared it and stood in front of the doctor, cap in hand. He looked at her a bit shyly, but expectantly eager.

"Tony," she said, "did you sell some mushrooms at the house on the top of The Ridge yesterday?"

"Yes." His face lighted. "Da nicest ones in da bunch. Nicea house, nicea folks," he said contentedly.

"Tony, the mushrooms you sold there were poisonous toadstools."

"I havea no toadstools; I sella mushrooms." He smiled

"But, listen, Tony, you left toadstools."

"No," he said gently but firmly.

The doctor was puzzled for a moment. "Tony," she said gravely, "you must try and help us find out about the toadstools. That was what you really left at the Carstairs home. Betty, the maid who bought them of you was very sick last night, and if the elder Miss Carstairs had not discovered what ailed her just in time, she would have died."

Tony lost all of his rich color and stared at the doctor with puzzled eyes. He seemed unable to speak.

"Betty is not dead; she is all right now," the doctor hastened to add. "Now think, Tony, and answer carefully. Where did you get the mushrooms you sold at the Carstairs house?"

"I gotta dem from my father, an' he grows dem in de cellar."

"Yes, the good ones—the ones you sold to the neighbors. But how about those you sold last—the bad ones? Where did they come from, Tony?"

"From my father."

"Please don't ask him any more; he knows nothing about them," said Hester in a distressed tone. "It's just as he says. He sold what his father gave him. Why don't you speak to his father?"

"He doesn't understand a word of English, and, besides, he grows nothing but mushrooms. I have been in his little cellar many times, and have been a steady patron of his ever since he came here.

"Tony, you know the difference between a mushroom and a toadstool, don't you?"

"Yes," Tony answered gravely.

"Then why didn't you notice what you were selling at your last place? Couldn't you see that they were not what you usually carried?"

"My father ties up da mushrooms in a cloth. I no see."

"Of course he does; Tony knows nothing about them, after they are given to him. His father never sells anything but the freshly picked ones. He does them up in

pound and half-pound packages, so that Tony does not have to measure or weigh them. I'll tell you what I'll do; I have a call to make, then I'll take you home and we will get some of the toadstools and show them to Johno, Tony's father. It's possible he can find the clue." She turned to the boy. "It's all right, Tony, we'll fix it up; you are not to blame."

"You tella my father I sell toadstools?" he asked fearfully.

"Do let us drop it!" cried Hester. "The kiddie is frightened to death. He doesn't know any more how the thing happened than I do. It was something that wouldn't happen again in a lifetime."

"No; we must see the thing out as far as we can. I'll see to it that Johno doesn't blame Tony."

They returned later with the toadstools.

Johno sniffed at the fried mess of fungi the doctor handed him to examine, and jabbered excitedly.

"What does he say, Tony?" she asked, turning to the boy.

"He says it's bad. Makea to die."

"Tell him that he wrapped it up in a cloth to sell with the other——"

"No, no!" Hester interrupted earnestly. "Let me talk to him. I understand Italian fairly well. She turned to the little man, and at first her sentences seemed labored; but as she went on she gained confidence and was talking as fast and gesticulating as often as the little Italian.

"Well, what was it all about?" asked the doctor, when there was an apparent lull.

"He says he must see the cloth the mushrooms were tied up in. He knows nothing about them."

"I can get the cloth in a short time," the doctor answered good-naturedly. She was out of the house and in the machine without another word. When she re-entered the house it was with an exceedingly puzzled expression. She held up a square piece of linen. It was a man's fine linen handkerchief. Johno seized it and grew purple in a sudden rage. He let out a flood of words that left him gasping for breath.

"He says he never saw the handkerchief before, that none of his mushrooms were ever done up in it," interpreted Hester.

"I knew it the moment I saw it," Doctor Margaret observed. "I don't suppose Johno ever saw such a fine piece of linen before. Tony, didn't you notice that it was different from the cloth your father always uses?"

"No," Tony answered diffidently. He was too shy to tell the truth, that he had been so pleased to sell his wares to the newcomers that he had not even noticed the cloth.

"It certainly is a mystery too deep for my solving," the doctor declared. "I don't think Tony knows anything about the source of the package that was sold at your house, and I am positive Johno is innocent. I don't believe any ill was meant toward you. Why, you don't know a soul, do you?"

"Not a soul outside of yourself," answered Hester.

CHAPTER FIVE

HESTER MEETS ONE OF THE NEIGHBORS

SEVERAL days had passed since the mushroom incident, and both Hester and her aunt had decided that the affair was one of those strange mysteries which happen only once in a lifetime; that they had been the victims was only an accident. They knew no one who could possibly want to harm either of them; neither had an enemy. Betty crossed herself and gave thanks to the saints for her fortunate escape; Hester dismissed the affair with a shrug of her shoulders; Miss Carstairs gave full homage to the voice.

Hester was disappointed at the slow delivery of the car she had bought. There were many orders in ahead of hers and she had been told that she would be in luck if she had the machine for early fall.

There was nothing about New York City during the summer months that was especially attractive to her, so she spent most of her time wandering in the woods surrounding The Ridge, or exploring the valley below. She became a tireless walker, grew tanned and rosy-cheeked; she was continually discovering a new tree, shrub or creeper, and daily brought home huge armfuls of moss, flowers and ferns.

"Miss Hester, when was you weighed last?" Betty asked, taking an armful of flowers from her that had been pushed almost to the toppling point by a mass of rooted ferns underneath.

"Not since I've been on The Ridge; haven't had time," Hester answered.

"It would take a good-sized wind to blow you over now. Did you know that a dimple has grown right down at the left side of your mouth?"

"Honest, a real dimple?" laughed Hester. "That's what your cooking does to me, Betty. I expect before long I'll be having them in my elbows and sporting three chins. I'm almost starved to death right now. Is luncheon ready?"

"Yes; it'll be on the table as soon as you are washed. I've got some more grape-juice on ice—I s'pose that's what makes your eyes such a deep purple—and an omelette. Of course, it's the eggs makes your hair so yellow." Betty grinned, very much pleased with herself.

Hester smiled her appreciation and hurried outside to plant the ferns she had brought home. There was a little brook that bisected the yard, and it was Hester's diversion to cover its shallow banks with ferns and other water-loving plants. It was a moment's work to place the rootlets in the fertile ground. As she was springing to her feet, she heard a tiny hiss. Startled, she looked down just in time to see a tiny little snake, which was crawling across her shoe-tips.

She recognized it as a harmless gartersnake; nevertheless, it was not a pleasant companion, and she quickly drew away from it.

"Betty," she cried, "there is a horrid, harmless little snake by the brook! I don't mind meeting them in the woods, for that's their home; but I do hate to have them right at our door."

"I stumble over them every time I hang up the clothes, or go into the yard; but I don't mind 'em," boasted Betty. "The poor little things are thirsty, I guess. Are you ready for lunch?"

"Just a minute, Betty; look at my hands." Hester held up her earth-stained hands in mock horror and ran upstairs.

Miss Carstairs was knitting war socks when Hester catapulted into her room, and, seizing her about the waist, bore her in triumph to the table.

"Auntie, don't you intend to take a minute off until you have all those socks finished. You've worked enough for to-day. You've got to go out in the woods this afternoon, while I show you the loveliest nook near the most romantic-looking spring you ever saw."

"My dear, I never saw such a change in a girl in so short a time in my life. Why, you are rosier than a rose; you are getting dimpled, and we have not been here a month. I don't understand it."

"All I needed, auntie, was fresh air and good food. Outdoors would cure me of any ailment, I do believe. You know it was the confinement of the schoolroom that first broke my health and the poor food I ate boarding around. My, how far away those days are, and my waitress days, too."

"Yes, The Ridge certainly agrees with you. It's strange."

"Why is it strange, auntie? You talk in enigmas," Hester protested.

Miss Carstairs crumpled a piece of bread abstractedly and did not answer.

"I shall report you to Mr. Hoover, auntie, if you waste any more bread," Hester teased.

Miss Carstairs smiled slowly, and carefully picked up the crumbs.

"The voice has not spoken for some time; perhaps there is nothing more for us to beware of," she said finally.

"Of course there isn't," Hester returned decisively. "I

think you look a little peaked, auntie; you must get out more. You must go to my nook with me this afternoon and I'll fix you up so cozy you will want to go there every day to knit. Your cheeks used to be pink."

"Not for many years, my dear; you forget I am no longer young," Miss Carstairs answered smilingly.

"You are still young, auntie," Hester protested. "You've lived alone so long that you've forgotten whether you're young or old. It's going to be my pleasure to remind you of your youth until you remember it yourself. We will get some of the pink back in your cheeks this afternoon."

"I'm sorry, dearie, but an old friend is motoring out to see me this afternoon. She telephoned while you were out this morning."

"Do you want me to stay and pour tea?" Hester asked a bit unhappily. The day seemed too warm to enjoy visiting with strangers; still, if her auntie wished it, she was quite ready to be martyred.

"No, indeed," Miss Carstairs returned briskly. "We would have a thousand things to say to each other that we would enjoy, and that would bore you to extinction. Take your customary walk, but manage to get back in time to let my friend see what a fine niece I have."

Hester promised, and, taking a book along for company, started for the secluded retreat she had found in the woods. It was a perfect September day, neither too hot nor too cold—a day for leisure and play. The air was invigorating, and Hester danced her way along.

"Poor Tonia! See! She is beating him with a snake!" Hester cried in horror.

The murmur of the brook reached her ears. She started down a stony path that led direct to the bubbling water, jumped the last stone, slipped, and would have had an unpleasant fall, if a masculine arm had not suddenly saved her—so suddenly that she could only breathe rapidly and stare.

"Well, that was one time when I was quick enough," a pleasant, drawling voice remarked, and Hester found herself placed neatly on her two feet. The young man who had spoken doffed his hat and stood smiling at her.

"Indeed you were," Hester agreed, returning the smile.

"Evidently you like my spring," he said.

"Is it your spring?" she asked uneasily. Ownership had not occurred to her. Woods always seemed public property.

"Mine by right of discovery. I have been coming here for the better part of a year."

"And I just discovered it the other day. I have enjoyed it for three undisturbed days, anyhow," she laughed; "but I won't trespass again."

"Please don't say anything as unkind as that. I was about to suggest a partnership. You know, I am your across-the-way neighbor. Armstrong is my name—Tom Armstrong, at your service." He gave her a sweeping bow.

Hester's eyebrows puckered. "There is only one house across from us, and an old fortune-teller lives there."

"Oh, is that what she does?" Armstrong chuckled. "I am awfully glad to hear something definite about her. You see, we live under the safe roof. It's a double house, with a good thick partition through it, dividing the two domains. I have never spoken to her, but I see her doing the wildest things. I thought she was mildly demented."

"She catches snakes. Did you ever see her do it?" Hester asked excitedly.

"No; but I saw her boiling the most devilish concoction in a big kettle out in the back-yard one day. I watched her from my chamber window. She walked around the kettle, mumbling every time she threw in a bone or a hunk of hair or a bit of old shoe. I was dead sleepy, for I had been up most of the night, writing; but I was too fascinated to leave until I knew what she was going to do with the brew."

"Well, did you find out?" Hester cried. She was seated on a fallen log and was listening with breathless interest to the young man's narration.

"No; I did not. I watched the better part of a day, but she continued to boil the concoction. I saw her do one thing that I have puzzled over a great deal. She took the lid off of the pot and thrust a stick into the hot mess it contained. She took out the stick, waved it three times slowly about her head, and then pointed it directly at a flock of pigeons flying overhead. You may believe it or not, but one of those pigeons left the flock, circled three times around her head and suddenly alighted on her shoulder."

"How very strange! But don't you think they were homing pigeons that belonged to her?"

"I have never seen any on the place, have you?"

"No." Hester shook her head dubiously. It was quite too absurd, and yet this quiet, self-contained young man spoke as though he thought the old fortune-teller possessed some strange power.

"Did she tell your fortune?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes," Hester answered shortly. "It isn't a very pleasant memory."

"Then she didn't give you the accustomed flattery?"

"No; quite the contrary."

"I don't think life has anything very hard in store for you," he said softly—so softly, it brought Hester to her feet with a feeling that she had been talking altogether too long and freely with this stranger, even if he was a

next-door neighbor. She picked up her book that had fallen.

"I must be going," she said. "Good-afternoon."

"Oh, I shall see you safely out of the woods. You might be alone the next time you fall," he offered.

She flushed with vexation. "Please don't let me disturb you further. I have been going about the woods without any mishap, and if I should fall I can pick myself up again," she finished ungraciously, her eyes flashing.

"That is for you to decide," he said quietly. "I had no thought of annoying you. I will bid you good-afternoon and I hope I haven't spoiled this pretty little nook. If it will make you any happier, I will promise not to visit it again while you are here."

If Hester spoke hastily she always repented quickly; and now she directed a disarming smile upon the young man.

"I wouldn't think of having you make such a promise. You must come across the road and meet my auntie; she never wears a thorn and she is always eager to get acquainted with her neighbors."

"And you, do you wish to see me again?"

His hat was off, and suddenly Hester noticed that Armstrong's hair was light and curly. The old woman had said that she would marry a man with blond, curly hair. Absurd! Nevertheless, the thought was disconcerting. She didn't like the man. There was something about his eyes that were ferret-like—a something that was almost shifty. Still, he had been nice to her; if he didn't persist in being so personal she could be much nicer to him.

"I would hardly ask you to call on my aunt, if I didn't feel friendly toward you myself," she said with cold dignity. Then, with a friendly little nod, she left him.

All the way home she kept recalling what the fortune-teller had said about the man with blond, curly hair.

"She said I knew him already," she soliloquized, and frowned thoughtfully; "but I don't. Anyhow, I hate curly hair and I despise blond hair, even if I do have it myself. It was bad enough to have that old woman spoiling the landscape without adding another figure. I suppose, now we know Mr. Armstrong, we will never know what privacy is again." Abruptly she bumped into a tree, rubbed the bumped spot ruefully, then burst into hearty laughter.

Dismissing all unpleasant thoughts like so many unpleasant guests, she was her own buoyant, happy, gay little self again—chasing butterflies, mocking the birds and gathering flowers.

"Has auntie's friend gone, Betty?" she cried, rushing into the kitchen, where Betty was doing fine lattice-work on a pie creation.

"No; they are up on the porch roof, talking like two sixteen-year-old school chums." Betty grinned and put a fluted edge all around the lattice-work.

"Then I won't bother them," Hester declared.

"Miss Carstairs said you was to come right up. She wants to show you off before the color gets out of your cheeks, I guess."

CHAPTER SIX

A NEW PLAYTHING.

"MISS HESTER; oh, Miss Hester!" Betty cried one morning, beating an excited tattoo on the bedroom-door of her young mistress. "It's come, it's come! Do get up, the gentleman is waiting."

"Who's waiting? What's come?" Hester asked, rubbing sleepy eyes.

"The bubble machine! The man says he's ready to give you a lesson."

"Tell him to wait, I'll be dressed in a minute!" Hester was wide awake now, and, springing from the bed, she hastened to put her words into effect.

"You don't have to hurry quite so fast," Betty admonished. "You've got to eat your breakfast, too, so the man can wait a few minutes more for you to dress proper."

"Oh, I won't shock you with my way of dressing," Hester declared laughingly, covering the tight little knob into which she had twisted her hair with a velvet cap and tucking under its tight band the stray hairs that had failed to be caught in the hasty knot. Without a glance in the mirror, she rushed down the stairs ahead of Betty, not listening to the admonitions of the latter to eat her breakfast first.

Catching up a sweater, she was out of the house and in the front seat of the machine before Betty had reached the front door.

"Oh, isn't it a beauty," she exulted, after a hasty "Good-morning" to the driver.

"It's a neat little machine, and it runs as smooth as a watch," the chauffeur offered.

Hester ran her fingers over the different parts of the working mechanism, and asked their several names. She asked pertinent questions, and then:

"Let me think," she said, puckering her eyebrows in a way peculiar to herself when concentrating; "this button generates power; this one starts the car; this one stops it; this one warns; the pedals determine the speed. I've got it!" she flashed suddenly. "You may get in," she told the chauffeur casually.

The man looked at her in amazement. "You don't mean you're goin' to start right off?" he asked blankly.

She had taken the driver's seat when she first sprang into the car, and now she made no attempt to vacate it. Indeed, she indicated the seat beside her, when she invited the driver to step in.

"How can I learn, if I don't first try the thing? Of course, I will probably make a few mistakes; but I think I'll learn quickly," she said lightly, placing her hands on either side of the steering-wheel.

"My land!" stammered the man. "One mistake will be quite enough to send us to kingdom-come. Don't start, please, till I know you've got things adjusted all right," he cried, jumping in beside her.

"I hope you're not nervous," Hester said calmly.

"Me, nervous?" the chauffeur puffed out as though he would burst. "Well, hardly. Go ahead," he cried, his eyes alert for any false move, his hands ready for quick action when it would be needed.

"I think I'll try the lane before I attempt to go down-hill," Hester said, starting the car smoothly. The lane was about the length of two city blocks. At the end it was fenced off from dense woodland. Hester steered straight towards the fence.

"Stop!" yelled the chauffeur, his eyes taking in a big oak-tree the other side of the fence.

Hester did so with such promptness the man was nearly shaken from his seat. "You'd make a good soldier," he said.

"But not a very good driver, you think," she laughed. "Now, I'll have to turn around. I am glad the lane is clear at this end."

"Hadn't I better turn for you? The trick is a bit difficult."

"But I've got to learn how to turn, haven't I? I can't always travel in a straight road." Hester backed as she spoke, executed a creditable curve and faced the other way.

"You certainly are a nervy one. I expected we'd turn turtle. You won't try to go down the hill, will you? That takes strength and experience," the man spoke anxiously.

"Not now. I'm going to try and reach Anderson Boulevard, and if I can drive down it without colliding with one or two of the thousand machines that race over it, I shall consider myself an expert driver."

"Cut your corners shorter," advised the chauffeur, as Hester made a wide turn into Edgewater Road.

"Thanks," drawled Hester, her color coming and going as she found that she had given herself just three inches leeway between her wheels and those of a machine pounding down the hill.

Two hours later she returned to the house, triumphant and alone. She had dismissed the chauffeur at the car-tracks and had made the mile between with no one directing. Jumping from the car, she ran into the house, re-

membering for the first time since she had left that she had had no breakfast.

"I am starving, Betty," she cried. "My, but it was fun to drive. You feel just as though you were a bird. Distances are just annihilated. Zip! and you've jumped a mile. Another zip, and you are a mile further."

"Oh, Hester; I am so glad you're home safe and sound." Miss Carstairs hurried into the dining-room. "Why didn't you tell me you were going out to try the new machine; I've been deeply worried."

Hester looked contritely at her aunt. "Auntie dear," she cried, "I never once thought of anything but that lovely bird just waiting for me to try out its wings. Oh, it is such fun to skim along! Just as soon as I have eaten I'll take you and Betty for a drive."

"I've got too much work to do," Betty muttered, not at all elated with Hester's proposition. She had watched her young mistress out of the kitchen-window when she had taken the sharp curve into Edgewater Road, and she was not anxious to risk her life in a joy ride.

Miss Carstairs hesitated. "I—I——" she stammered.

"Cowards, both of you," Hester interrupted teasingly. "You are afraid I can't drive. Why, you ought to see me skim over the road."

"I did see you," Betty returned; "you took the corner on two wheels."

"But that was when I first started out," Hester defended. "Did you see me when I came back?"

"No," Betty admitted reluctantly.

"All four wheels were on the ground and I handled the machine like an old driver; the chauffeur said I did. He said I didn't need any more lessons; all that I had to do now was to practise. May I have just one more cake, Betty; they are the best ever?"

Betty brought another plate of the steaming cakes and watched with pleasure the young girl heap her plate. She turned to Miss Carstairs with a knowing nod. "They will add another half-pound to her weight," she said.

"I feel just like a stuffed pig," Hester declared, finishing the last bite and jumping up from the table. "Who is going with me?"

"I'll be ready in a minute," Miss Carstairs promised, "as soon as I get a wrap."

"How about it, Betty?" Hester laughingly challenged.

"I never did like to see or hear folks practising," the maid returned apologetically. She busied herself clearing the table.

"Oh, auntie," Hester cried enthusiastically, ignoring Betty, "I had forgotten there were such good things to eat in the market, until we stopped in front of a big market in Union Hill. Such fruits and vegetables are never brought to our door by peddlers or telephone orders."

"What's that, Miss Hester, you was saying about vegetables?" asked Betty, catching part of what her mistress said.

Hester had said what she did to catch Betty's interest; but now she pretended indifference. Turning to her auntie, who had enveloped herself in a motor-coat and veil, she called out gaily:

"All aboard," and rushed out to the car.

"Wait!" Betty cried excitedly, running to the door. "Did you say you saw nice fruits and vegetables?"

"Wonderful things. Some fruits I didn't even know the name of," Hester declared, jumping into the driver's seat.

"Would you wait until I turn the gas off and lock the doors?" Betty called. "I'll go with you," she declared, with a do-or-die air.

"I'll wait an hour, if you say so," Hester called back. Her eyes were brimming over with mischief as she turned to Miss Carstairs. "I knew she couldn't resist a chance of shopping for new things to cook."

"You will have to make good," Miss Carstairs returned smilingly. "Have you a license?" she asked, suddenly anxious. "You can't drive around alone without one."

"That's what we went to Union Hill for, to get a license."

"But how could you learn in one short morning to drive a car well enough to be allowed a license?"

"Oh, dear!" Hester made a little *moue* of despair. "I see that I can't pose any longer as a phenomenon. I'll have to confess. You see, auntie, long ago, when I was teaching school in the East, before I went to Denver to wait on tables, I learned how to drive a car. It was just for one short summer and I had no idea it would all come back quickly as it did. I really handle the car with no difficulty whatever."

Miss Carstairs gave a deep sigh of relief and settled back among the cushions with a delightful feeling of luxury. Betty had arrived in time to be an interested listener. Her sigh also was one of relief, and she entered the car with a firm tread. In one hand was a huge basket and in the other an oil-cloth bag.

"Are you going to stock us up for the winter, Betty?" She had turned an amused glance on the maid's equipment when her attention was directed elsewhere.

"Good-morning, Miss Carstairs."

It was her neighbor, Tom Armstrong. She had not seen him since she had first met him in the woods. He had crossed the road, hat in hand, and now approached the machine. Hester was rather pleased to see him, and greeted him pleasantly.

"Auntie, this is our neighbor I told you of. Mr. Armstrong, Miss Carstairs," she introduced.

Miss Carstairs acknowledged the introduction with a strange coolness she could not understand nor hide. A vibration of repugnance seized her entire being and she leaned forward with the strange, strained, listening look that often came to her since she had come to The Ridge.

If the young man noticed anything unusual, he did not allow it to annoy him in any way. He chatted with Hester, explaining to her that the reason he had not called on her aunt was because he had been away ever since they had met. He assured her that he was very eager now to make up for lost time, and would call that evening, if she were willing.

Betty was looking at the man with open approval. Such a well-set-up young fellow, she felt, was just what The Ridge needed to make it more attractive to a young girl like Hester. The Ridge was a lonely place to live on, in spite of its natural beauty of scenery. Perhaps the young man would fall in love with Hester. She sighed sentimentally.

Hester misinterpreted the sigh and thought Betty was anxious to move on. She nodded encouragingly to her and turned to the young man.

"Won't you jump in and take a ride with us?" she invited. "Perhaps you would like to be taken to the cars instead. Consider this a magic carpet and make a wish to be set down anywhere within a radius of ten miles, and you will find your wish come true," she bantered.

Mr. Armstrong hesitated a moment. "You can't imagine how you tempt me," he said. "You probably don't know it—not knowing much about me, anyhow—but I am writing what I hope will be the novel of the time. I've been away gathering material and——" He jumped into the seat next to Hester with an air of abandon. "Well," he laughed, "I don't get an invitation like this every day."

"Where shall I put you down?" Hester asked.

"Oh, can't I just go along? I have no other destination outside of my workroom."

"I am going to take Betty shopping," Hester began.

"Oh, please, Miss Hester," Betty protested, "ride around all the pretty places you want to; don't mind me." She smiled fatuously; she considered her mistress and the young man a very good-looking couple. "Oh!" she cried, and bounded in the air. Hester had turned the corner into Edgewater Road and this time she had made a short turn.

"Never mind, Betty," Hester reassured her, "a bump like that is really good for the liver."

"I never complained of my liver," Betty informed Miss Carstairs. She leaned toward the elder woman confidentially. "Don't they make a pretty pair?" she asked, pointing to the two in front.

"No!" Miss Carstairs returned violently—so violently, that both Hester and Mr. Armstrong turned to look at her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FORTUNE-TELLER ATTACKS TONY

MISS CARSTAIRS' violent feeling of antipathy towards their young neighbor, Mr. Armstrong, continued in spite of the young man's evident attempts to conciliate her.

Hester could not understand it, and Miss Carstairs could not explain it. "It is a discordant vibration that his presence gives me. I don't know why nor how; I just know that I distrust and fear him."

"Auntie, if it was any one else but you, I would say, 'How silly!' But I know it isn't silly in you; it is just some fine wire in you—so fine it is almost invisible—that has become a bit unstrung and records out of tune. It must be that, or you could see that Mr. Armstrong is really a fine man," Hester would remonstrate.

"No; it is something more material than that. There is some good reason for my feeling as I do." Miss Carstairs was firm on that point.

Betty for the first time began to think that Miss Carstairs, the elder, was getting old. She explained to Hester that that was the reason for her aunt's dislike of the young man.

"Why, he's as handsome and straight as an Indian, and so easy-going," she declared, after another trip to the Union Hill market. Armstrong had carried a basket, and good-naturedly bickered with the market men, beating them down to half their original price, much to the delight of Betty, who followed in his wake.

"He's a regular home man," she declared.

The car had put a stop to Hester's daily walks; but one rainy afternoon, not caring to take the car out, and, tired of moping in the house, she put on rubbers and a raincoat and started for a walk. The days were getting colder and the trees were turning crimson and gold. Hester walked briskly until she had reached the brook that held her especial nook in its embrace. She knelt down at the spring which mothered the brook and cupped her hands. She had taken one cool, invigorating draft of the sweet water, when she heard a faint chuckle. Springing to her feet, she looked about in surprise.

The voice sounded like Armstrong's; but Hester knew he was far away from Ridgefield. He had bade her good-by the night before, saying he was going to Chicago on the night train. Again there was a chuckle, and she turned toward the sound. It was the old crone—the fortune-teller whom she had not seen since the day she had had her fortune told.

She approached Hester with the wheedling smile the young girl remembered so vividly. "You have met the young man with blond, curly hair," she said. "How do you like him?"

The color ebbed and flowed in Hester's cheeks. "I—I don't know what you mean," she stammered.

"Oh, yes, you do," the crone returned. "The blond young man I told you of—the one you will marry, if you live." The old crone's eyes seemed to pierce to Hester's very soul. She shivered and turned a deathly white. For a moment she thought she would lose consciousness; then, with a supreme effort, she recovered her poise and looked the old woman coolly in the face.

"Your prophesies are not very pleasant," she said.

"They could be made very pleasant, if you would pay attention to a charm I can give you," the woman returned eagerly.

Hester laughed, her courage coming back. "You don't really think that there is any virtue in a charm?" she asked.

"I don't think; I know there is. And you will know it some day," the crone returned pleasantly. Her eyes never left those of Hester's.

There was something about the old hag's voice that was disarming. It held almost a hypnotic charm for Hester. She felt herself both drawn to the creature and at the same time repelled. The idea of a charm holding any power she knew was idiotic. Still, the old woman believed in it. There might be something about a charm that she could not understand. There were so many things in the world people didn't understand.

"If ever you are in trouble, come to me and I will show you what a charm can do," the old woman said, and, turning abruptly, disappeared in the woods.

All the cheer of her walk had been taken out of it for Hester. She returned home in a serious state of mind. The old hag seemed so positive that harm was to befall her, and possible death, try as she would, she could not shake off an ominous feeling. Usually she rushed into the house with springing steps; but now she came in limp and sedate. She left her rubbers and coat in the outer hall and went into the large front room. She walked listlessly to the front window, leaned her elbows on the wide sill, and looked out over the valley.

"Have a nice walk?" Miss Carstairs asked absently, without looking up. She was turning the heel of a war sock. It was a delicate operation that required all her attention.

Hester did not answer, but Miss Carstairs' mind was too preoccupied to notice her silence. Five minutes passed; the heel was nicely rounding.

"Did you have a nice walk?" she repeated.

"No," Hester answered in a faraway tone.

Miss Carstairs looked at her quickly. Hester was still staring out of the window out into the valley.

"You didn't get wet?"

"No," the tone was still impersonal.

Miss Carstairs put down her knitting and walked over to the window by Hester. She put her arm around the girl's waist and stood watching out of the window with her.

"What do you see, dear?" she asked quietly.

"My ghost," Hester answered with a discordant laugh. "My ghost!" she repeated hysterically, and burst into tears.

Miss Carstairs gathered her into her arms and soothed her as she would a little child. When the tears had somewhat abated, she led her to a couch and pulled her down beside her.

"Now tell me what happened on the walk," she said quietly.

"I met that fortune-teller woman that lives across the road. She says I am going to have trouble and may die," Hester sobbed.

"Is that all?" Miss Carstairs asked lightly, in a greatly relieved tone.

"Isn't it enough?" Hester asked in a tragic tone.

"The woman is an impostor. She is a trickster. There is always trouble of some sort before all of us. Any one can say that, and death is also before us all in good time. You mustn't put a grain of trust in what that old woman says," Miss Carstairs remonstrated. "Why, my dear, I am surprised at you. You are generally ready to laugh at things that are really occult. I don't understand it."

"Nor do I," Hester suddenly affirmed, sitting up and drying her eyes a bit shame-facedly. "Things sound very different when I sit here telling you about them; but when she looked at me and spoke so softly and surely—I—felt almost hypnotized."

"I noticed the one time I saw her a sort of hypnotic something about her eyes. They were unpleasant, ferret-like."

Hester didn't speak of the charm the old woman spoke of; the whole affair seemed very silly to her now. Betty came in to throw a couple of logs on the grate-fire. "That fortune-teller woman is back at her house," she said.

"Yes, I saw her in the woods," Hester answered.

Betty's eyes opened wide. "I wouldn't care to meet her anywhere alone, 'specially in the woods. I threw some things into the alley a minute ago and I ran plumb into her. That was enough for me. My, her eyes are awful! She makes my spine fairly creep. The next time she looks at me like that I'll——" Betty didn't finish in words what she would do; but she doubled up her fist threateningly. "Hester, we must go into the city to-morrow, if it is a pleasant day. You remember my speaking of a friend of mine, a doctor of theosophy, a prophet and reader of the stars?"

"The one that read your future five years ago? Yes," Hester answered expectantly.

"I received a letter from him to-day; he is home and wants us to call on him as soon as convenient. I have told him about you, given him your name, birth month, day and year. He is ready to tell you what the stars have in store for you. He says the reading will be very interesting."

"I hope it won't rain to-morrow," Hester cried with eager enthusiasm. "Oh, if it does——" Her voice trailed off despondently.

"If it does the heavens won't fall," laughed Miss Carstairs. "Our going to-morrow is not a case of life or death. Doctor Rue will be ready to see us whenever we are ready to go; but you won't have to wait. There's your rainbow—see?"

Hester sprang to the window. "Isn't it wonderful?" she whispered. A long silence followed, which was abruptly broken by her exclaiming excitedly:

"Auntie, come here quickly. Do you see that? Isn't that the boy Tony?" She pointed across the way. "See how angry that old woman is. Do you suppose she will dare to hurt him?"

"Not in broad daylight," Miss Carstairs returned in amazement. "She wouldn't dare; she is just trying to scare him."

"Isn't he plucky. She has done something that he is very angry about. Hear him scream at her. They are talking about mushrooms. Poor Tony; I wonder if he is in new trouble with his wares. See, she is beating him with a snake!" Hester cried in horror. "Say, you stop!" she yelled at the top of her voice, throwing the window wide open, that her voice might carry.

The boy Tony, screaming with terror and anger, had run out of the yard and was half-way up the road when Hester thrust her head out of the window. He did not see her, but the old woman did. She stood looking at Hester a moment, then waved the snake mockingly. With a demoniacal chuckle, she turned and re-entered the house.

"What a horrible creature!" Hester cried.

"She is partly demented, without a doubt." Miss Carstairs closed the window and the two returned to the couch.

The next morning was a delightful prelude of the day. Hester drove her aunt in early, as they had some shopping to attend to. At two they were to meet Doctor Rue.

He came into the waiting-room—a tall, slender, magnetic, gray-haired, gray-eyed man. He shook hands with Miss Carstairs and bowed gravely to the girl beside her.

"I am glad to see you," he said simply; "be seated."

"And so this is the one that helped the stars to fulfil your fate?" he said, indicating Hester with a friendly smile.

"Yes; and we are here now to hear what the stars have in store for her," Miss Carstairs responded.

"Your life was seriously menaced last month, and some mysterious message saved you." He addressed Hester.

"Mushrooms," said Hester explosively.

"The call of the valley," breathed Miss Carstairs softly.

"You are under the influence of a malign star, and will continue in its power for several months. I wish I had the power to be more definite; but I haven't. Your life is in jeopardy, that I know. That you will eventually escape, I am sure."

"Don't you think if we change our location it might help?" asked Miss Carstairs, thinking of the ugly old woman.

"No; Miss Hester's present home is closely linked with her future destiny—I should say as close as marriage. She will receive her greatest happiness and unhappiness there. I told you that Miss Hester's life-reading was an interesting one; but I feel that it should be read slowly. Come to me again in three months; history is going to turn over many leaves for her during that time."

"You fill my heart with foreboding, doctor," Miss Carstairs cried.

"Tell me about the call of the valley," he countered, settling himself into a listening attitude.

She gave him the full history of the mushroom episode and the mysterious voice that warned her. He listened attentively. Finally his face relaxed into a warm, boyish smile.

"Don't you see how clear it all is now?" he asked eagerly. "No matter what happens, this occult power that comes to you from the valley will nullify any malign influence that might menace Miss Hester's life."

CHAPTER EIGHT

A LEAP INTO THE VALLEY

DOCTOR RUE'S disclosures were far from reassuring to either Hester or her aunt. The former drove like one in a dream—carefully, with eyes open, but seemingly unseeing. Her mind, however, was far from being a blank. Her thoughts kept time with the wheels of the car; over and over they turned and whirled in unison.

His prophecy was so like that of the old woman, it filled her with foreboding. He had not said that she would marry a blond man with curly hair, but he had said that her home was closely linked with her marriage. Who but Tom Armstrong could he have meant? The old crone was a better seer than she or her aunt had believed.

It was not pleasant for a young girl just beginning to taste the joys of life to be told that her life was threatened. What if things did turn out all right in the end? She didn't want anything to do with trouble.

Miss Carstairs had remained silent through the ride. She was naturally philosophic and had the added advantage of years. She was inclined to look beyond rather than at the present. Her thoughts were more optimistic than those of Hester's. She was thinking of the voice that would counteract all evil. By the time they had reached the ferry her face was wearing a calm smile and she was even pleasantly occupied with thoughts of the future.

The wait at the ferry jolted Hester out of her self-centered thoughts. Traffic had piled up so, that each driver of the long line of waiting automobiles had to be on the alert to seize an opening and prevent his wheels from interlocking with those of his neighbor. It was a good three-quarters of an hour from the time Hester's machine reached the ferry till it rolled onto terra firma on the Jersey side.

Once on the open road, Hester might have relapsed into her former state of apprehension, had she not suddenly recognized a familiar little figure. It was Tony, the little Italian boy, who had brought the toadstools to the house. He had brought them mushrooms several times since, and Hester was quite fond of the laughing, black-eyed little chap. She brought her machine to a stop and waited for him to catch up with them.

"Jump in, Tony," she invited, and the boy sprang in beside her.

"It's a nicea day," he offered shyly, and laughed happily when he bounced up with the car's start.

"Tony, what did you and that ugly old woman across the street quarrel about the other day?" Hester asked curiously.

The boy didn't answer, and she looked at him in surprise to note that his face had turned to a chalky whiteness. He was trembling, either in fear or rage, she could not make out which. "She——" he began, then stopped suddenly. His mouth closed like a trap.

"What was it, Tony? Surely you are not afraid to tell me?" Hester said sympathetically.

The boy turned his soft dog-like eyes upon Hester, and they were full of fear.

"What was it, Tony?" Hester repeated with an encouraging smile.

The boy shook his head.

"I saw her striking at you with a live snake. It was awful. What did she do it for?"

Tony shuddered, but remained silent.

"Don't you want to tell me?" Hester prodded curiously.

"No," the boy answered fearfully.

"Why?"

"She killa me," Tony whispered hoarsely, crossing himself.

"Ridiculous!" Hester scoffed. "She's a harmless old woman, with a bad temper. Don't let her frighten you like that, Tony."

"She's bad; one devil," the boy insisted doggedly. "You

no know. Da musharoom——" Again he stopped and closed his mouth trap-like.

"What about the mushrooms, Tony? Did she have anything to do with the toadstools you brought to our house?" Hester asked excitedly.

"You letta me out!" screamed Tony, jumping to his feet and gathering himself as though for a spring.

The car swerved perilously as Hester made a sudden grab for the boy's wrist. "Do you want to kill yourself?" she cried. "Sit down," she ordered sternly. The boy crumpled in his seat, whimpering. The car under control, Hester gave him her attention again. She felt that it was useless to press him to talk, but she must not let him feel afraid of her. They were nearing his home. When they had reached it, Hester stopped. "Here we are, Tony," she cried cheerfully.

The boy hesitated, then turned mournful eyes upon her. "We friends?" he asked anxiously.

"The best friends that ever were," Hester returned. She put her hand out to clasp the little brown one in a friendly grasp. "Forget that I asked you to talk, Tony," she said kindly. "But," she continued, looking at him significantly, "remember, I can keep a secret, and when you feel you want to talk, come to me; I may be able to help you."

"I remember," Tony promised solemnly. He jumped from the machine and Hester started the car.

"Will you look at that child?" Miss Carstairs suddenly cried. She was peering out of the little window in the back of the car.

One swift, backward glance caused Hester to break into a peal of laughter. "A true child of Italy. One moment in tears, the next all smiles," she exclaimed; for Tony, arms akimbo, was dancing with the grace of a young sprite a fandango for the amusement of a number of children.

"Can you beat it?" Miss Carstairs murmured, still dazed.

Again Hester's laughter peeled forth. "Oh, auntie," she cried, "I don't know which is the funnier—Tony's kaleidoscopic antics, or your breaking into slang. Can you beat it?" she repeated teasingly.

Miss Carstairs smiled indulgently. "You will confess that the occasion was unusual," she defended. "I still don't understand the boy's dual nature. He threw his fear aside so quickly one can't help but wonder if it wasn't all put on."

"Not at all," Hester replied earnestly; "there is something between him and the fortune-teller woman that has to do with the mushrooms. In what way, I don't know. She has frightened him into silence. I may be able to coax him to tell me all about it some time. He was frightened when he thought I was going to force him to talk. His gaiety sprang from a relieved feeling of escape."

The sun was just setting as Hester reached home. The brilliant color in the western sky always brought out her pet adjectives. She seemed never to tire of its changing beauty. Running the car into the garage, she hastened outside to watch the last crimson-tinted cloud turn to an ashen gray.

When the sky grew cold, a feeble flame drew her attention to the double house opposite. From where she stood, she had an unobstructed view of the living-room on the north side, through the broad, low front-window. She could see the old crone lighting a candle. An amused smile curved her lips for an instant as she saw the old woman draw a match down the length of her skirt at the side, with a truly masculine movement. Then, as the old woman, candle in hand, stepped to the window and seemed to be peering at her, she turned and ran into the house as though fleeing an evil spirit.

"Bless me," Betty cried as Hester appeared in the hall breathless, "what are you running from?" She had just turned on the lights.

"The dark," Hester returned lightly.

"The dark!" Betty scoffed with a toss of her head. "Don't you go to telling me any bugaboo stories. You afraid of the dark! And every night you wait until you can't see your hands before your face, then you get out that devil wagon and rush off to Grantwood for the mail."

"Well, we have to have our mail, don't we?" Hester asked demurely.

"Yes; but why wait till pitch dark?"

"The last mail doesn't come until seven, and the sun sets before six."

"And you talking about being afraid of the dark. You'll have to tell that to the marines," she jeered.

Hester held up her hands in mock horror. "First auntie, and now you, Betty, indulging in slang." Hester's eyes danced. "What will become of the good old English?"

"Oh, go along with you," Betty grinned. She started for the kitchen, but stopped in the doorway to add, "Supper's almost ready. We're having——"

"And I am starving." Hester took the stairs two at a bound.

"Waffles," floated over Betty's shoulders, accelerating Hester's steps.

Hester's bedroom faced the west, and, after a quick bath and freshly gowned, she stood a moment at the window, looking out into the dark. She noticed the faint glimmer of the candle burning in the house opposite. She could see the pattering form of the old woman evidently preparing her supper. Hester's own light was out before she had raised the window-shade.

She carefully lowered the shade before leaving the room to go down-stairs. It was as though she feared the prying eyes of the old woman might penetrate its darkness, if they were not curtained out.

Miss Carstairs had taken up her knitting, but she put it down to join Hester at the dinner-table. It was characteristic of the older woman not to bring up trying subjects in the dining-room. So any mention of Tony or Doctor Rue's prophecies was tabooed. A book that she was reading, which was dramatized and being played in New York, was a topic she did not exhaust until coffee was brought in.

"We will see it Saturday," was her farewell comment.

"Are you going with me for the mail?" Hester asked, preparing for her nightly trip a little later. Miss Carstairs suppressed a sigh, but arose obligingly. "It's too bad to tear you away from your book; Betty will go with me," Hester cried, catching the sigh. "We won't be gone over half an hour. I could go alone, only I know you wouldn't hear to it."

"No, indeed. Do you want to go, Betty?" Miss Carstairs turned to the maid.

"Yes, I was going anyway; I've got to get my shoes."

An hour later Miss Carstairs looked up from her book, glanced at the clock, and jumped up in alarm. Hester had been gone an hour. Something had happened. She rushed outside and looked up the lane down which Hester must come from Grantwood. Her heart almost stopped beating from sudden relief, for around the bend came the headlights of Hester's machine. An arclight at the turn plainly revealed her niece at the wheel.

She started toward the garage to open the door, when suddenly all the world seemed to swim about her. Hester's car, instead of taking the curve and coasting to the garage, as usual, had leaped high into the air and crashed straight down into the valley.

CHAPTER NINE

A BAFFLING MYSTERY

RUNNING, falling, crazed with fear, Miss Carstairs followed in the wake of the red light that bobbed and careened wildly. A feeling of nausea almost overcame her, but she managed to plunge on. Her lips moved in prayer for strength to endure what she felt she would find. The dark was bewildering, but she kept her eyes glued to the red light. Time and again she stumbled and fell as her feet became entangled in briers and wild grasses. Abruptly the red light disappeared.

"Hester!" she screamed hoarsely. The next moment she had collided with a tree. Stunned and confused with the impact, she moved on slowly, feeling her way. The red light appeared again, quite near now; but the awful quiet almost stilled her heart-beats. Still she kept on until the car was reached.

"Hester," she called softly. "Betty!" she cried; then she

saw that the machine was empty. She had passed them on the way, dead or dying, and she was unable, physically or mentally, to retrace her steps. She tottered, and suddenly felt herself being supported by a pair of strong arms.

"Why, Miss Carstairs," she heard a man's voice cry in astonishment, "what are you doing here?" It was Mr. Armstrong, their neighbor. "You—you weren't in the car?" he asked excitedly.

Miss Carstairs shook her head. Speech was beyond her.

"Where is Miss Hester? Was she——" He broke off abruptly. "It is her car. I was just getting home from my trip; I was at the door when I saw two searchlights go bolting down the side hill. I knew a wreck must follow; but I never dreamed the car was Miss Hester's."

"We must find her," Miss Carstairs moaned feebly.

"Of course," Armstrong returned briskly, still continuing to support her. "If you will let me seat you in the car, I can search better alone. The car seems to be all right. By Jove! one of the wheels is gone. Some jilt it got!" he exclaimed, when he was free to examine the machine. "Nothing but a miracle could save any one from a ride like that."

"Isn't it lucky the days of miracles are still with us?" came a mocking voice out of the darkness.

"Please don't joke," expostulated another voice.

"Hester! Betty!" cried Miss Carstairs hysterically, new life surging into her veins.

"You, too, auntie. When did you come?" cried Hester, coming within the zone of the searchlights.

"Aren't you hurt, either of you?" Miss Carstairs' voice asked anxiously.

"Not a hair," Hester reassured. "But it was some ride, believe me! I don't know yet just where we are. Betty and I have been looking around."

"You are about half-way down the hillside. No doubt your losing a wheel helped you to stop," offered Tom Armstrong.

"I thought you were in Chicago," said Hester. She turned to Miss Carstairs. "You were worried, weren't you, dear?" She patted her hand lovingly. "We will have to leave the car here till morning; I don't suppose we can get any one to tow it at this hour. Suppose we go home?"

On the return trip, Mr. Armstrong offered his arm to Miss Carstairs, the elder, and gallantly helped her over the rough places. Hester and Betty led the way—the former lightly and airily, as though out for an evening stroll; the latter heavy-footed and muttering imprecations against all devil wagons in general.

At the top of the hill Hester stopped. "Mr. Armstrong can take you in, auntie. Betty and I are going to find out what shot us into the air."

She had taken one step when something fell upon her shoulders, completely covering her head.

"But I must know, too, Hester," Miss Carstairs protested. "Now, that I know you are safe and unhurt, I want to know what caused the accident."

Hester had run on ahead, until she had reached the turn in the road, where her car had leaped. "It's gone," she said in an odd tone.

"What's gone?" asked Mr. Armstrong, as he and Miss Carstairs joined her.

"It," Hester answered absently. She was now looking thoughtfully at a shadow that lay across the road. It was the shadow of the arc-light-post.

"What is it, Hester?" Mr. Armstrong insisted.

"I don't know; but it lay right there." She pointed to the shadow.

"There is nothing here." Armstrong walked through the shadow.

"No; but there was."

"Perhaps your machine dragged it a distance," Mr. Armstrong suggested. "You can find out better in the morning light."

"That's so; we are wasting time in the dark," Hester agreed. She thanked him for his kindness to her aunt at their door, and tried to infuse a little warmth into her tone when bidding him good-night.

The next morning, not a bit the worse for her wild ride of the night before, she was out of bed early, dressed, breakfasted and off exploring. The marks were plain where her machine had skidded; but there was nothing to show why it had taken the wild leap that had caused the skidding and following disaster.

She could see the machine plainly at the foot of the side hill. A ditch had stopped it. It was nearer the road than she had hoped. It would be an easy matter to get it out; but a matter of a week or so before she could use it again. She followed the trail it had made over the rough ground, hoping to find the log that she was positive had lain in the shadow.

She had sensed an unusual density in the shadow cast by the pole the night before; but she was upon it and shunted over before she fully realized that it was substance instead of shadow. The light of day revealed nothing that in any way resembled a log. There were plenty of brambles, bushes and growing trees, but nothing that would solve the mystery.

She sat down in the car to think. Something had been placed in the road to stop her car. The road that she had come down was almost a private one; the lane even was seldom traveled. It had been her habit ever since the car had come to go this way for the last mail. Thoughts of the old woman would creep in. Why was she mixed up with the mushroom episode? Did she know of this new attempt on her life? She had said that death was before her. For that matter, Doctor Rue had warned.

It was too much for a girl of high spirits. In spite of the malign influence that was making itself felt, Hester threw off the feeling of depression, jumped out of the car and started out on a brisk walk towards her favorite woods.

It was close upon noon when she returned—red-cheeked, bright-eyed and hollow with hunger.

"I called up the garage and told them you wanted them to come and get your car. They got it an hour ago," Betty greeted.

"Good, Betty," Hester thanked. "Did they say when I could have it?"

"In about ten days. They wanted to know where we buried our dead."

Hester laughed. "Where's auntie?" she cried.

"In bed. She hasn't got up yet."

"That's funny; auntie is generally the first one up." She ran up to her room and was startled to find her looking so worn and tired.

"Good-morning, Hester." Miss Carstairs forced a smile.

"You aren't sick, are you, auntie?" Hester asked anxiously.

"No, just tired."

"Last night used you up, auntie, and you were too considerate to say so. How selfish of me to go away and not find out if you were all right." Hester felt conscience-stricken. Nothing would do until she had brought up a dainty luncheon on a tray and watched Miss Carstairs eat it until the last crumb disappeared.

"Now, you may get up and dress," she allowed; "but don't you do any more worrying about me. Just remember that Doctor Rue said my life was in danger, but that I would eventually escape."

"It's easy to remember, after the danger is passed," returned her aunt.

"I know it, and you are an old dear. But you will stop worrying for the present, won't you?"

"Yes," Miss Carstairs promised, smiling faintly.

In the afternoon Mr. Armstrong called. He had been too busy writing to help Hester investigate the accident, but he had seen her from his window and wondered what she had discovered.

"Nothing," Hester answered rather shortly. A strange, antagonistic feeling swept over her. It was not because of what he said, but the way he said it. She felt that he believed she had jumped at a shadow. His next words confirmed her belief.

"Of course, you know, that if there had been anything in the road to obstruct your machine it would still be in evidence." His tone exasperated Hester.

"I know nothing of the sort," she said hotly.

"Indeed, and why?" he asked in polite surprise.

"Oh, because," Hester laughed, suddenly recovering her poise. "Did you ever see the leaves with such deep crimson tints as they are wearing now?" she asked irrelevantly. "I was out in the woods this morning and I could hardly tear myself away from their beauty."

Mr. Armstrong's brows raised in further surprise; but he chatted with them amiably about the autumn's colorings.

When he had gone, Hester indulged in a prodigious yawn. "Sometimes that young man bores me almost to extinction," she said.

"I feel we see too little of young people in general. You must miss companions of your own age. I wonder if we didn't make a mistake coming out to this desolate place," Miss Carstars observed thoughtfully.

"Auntie, you are side-stepping. I spoke of one person that bores me, and he is young, too. Do you like Mr. Armstrong?"

"I hardly know him," she parried. "He was very kind and sympathetic last night."

"Auntie, do you vibrate in harmony with Mr. Armstrong?" Hester asked sternly.

"No," Miss Armstrong answered mildly.

"I knew it!" Hester exulted. "He is kind in his way; but his way could be improved upon at times."

CHAPTER TEN

BETTY MAKES A DISCOVERY

ALTHOUGH it was galling to her pride, Hester laid little stress on the fact that something substantial had caused her to plough her machine down the side hill. She felt that it would distress her aunt far more to feel some one was trying to injure her than to believe that she had shied at a shadow. So she let Mr. Armstrong's insinuations pass, and even encouraged Miss Carstairs in believing in them.

"The shadow cast by that pole is very deep," the latter observed suggestively, as they passed the corner where the machine had run wild. "I wish you would give up driving, Hester; I can't bear to think of you in another accident. Winter is coming on, too, and the snow and ice are going to make the hill almost impassable."

"My dear auntie, do you realize we will be as shut in as prisoners if we don't have a car to get us out? Imagine our walking a mile in the snow and ice to the nearest car?" They were returning from Grantwood after a brisk evening walk for the late mail.

"If the doctor hadn't ordered country life for you, I would advise moving into the city for the winter. I am afraid your own car will fail to give you freedom for many days at a time. But the place does agree with you. You are no longer a frail, fragile girl. You really look like a country-bred girl."

"I feel like one, too. My old headaches and backaches are a thing of the past. It's the air; I'd die to be cooped up in the city. So would you. There is plenty of time to make social friends and enjoy them when we are both rejuvenated. We will go somewhere next summer, to some watering-place, where you can sit on the veranda and knit and exchange ideas with other humans to your heart's content. I will swim and flirt and become the reigning belle."

"Hester, you're incorrigible!" Miss Carstairs laughed. "Imagine either of us fitting such a rôle. I shall say no more about making a change, and, of course, you will drive your car when it is ready again. But," she hesitated, "you must learn to drive right through shadows. It's safest," she finished hurriedly, as though fearing to hurt Hester's feelings.

"Yes, auntie," Hester agreed patiently. But when Miss Carstairs had gone in she stayed out with the excuse that she needed more exercise. That it was not a shadow that had turned her car, but a bonafide log, she was positive. She had felt it, and so had Betty. Their being saved was very much as Armstrong said—a miracle. She walked back to the arclight and looked down into the valley filled with myriad lights.

The voice had not warned her auntie, and still she was saved. One thought had been pressing at the back of her brain all day, and now she made it free. Had she fallen into the presence of the voice and thereby been saved? It was an awe-inspiring thought and one that could not be answered. Twice she had been near death, and dread of the third attempt was considerably lessened by this big thought. It would help her to go about her affairs without feeling that a sword, hung by a thread, was eternally swinging above her head.

It did not prevent her from giving a startled scream, however, when something cold and hard was suddenly pressed into her hand. She had not heard a sound, and the impact was too unsuspected.

"Don't be frightened, honey," came in dulcet tones from the figure that had sprung up beside her and which was gradually outlining into the crippled form of the fortune-teller.

"I am not frightened," Hester denied coldly. "I was startled." She had dropped the package thrust into her hand.

"I meant startled," the hunchback corrected. She picked up the fallen article and again proffered it to Hester earnestly.

"It is the secret charm. Your life has been attempted twice. The next time may be fatal. These powders I have prepared to save you. I am going away for a week and

I don't like to leave you unprotected. Take one each morning for ten days, and no power on earth can harm you." The old woman placed the package into Hester's hand and curled her fingers about it. "You will take them, won't you?" she urged eagerly. "I was young once," she sighed, "and youth is too wonderful to lose."

Hester's indignation could endure no more. Again she spurned the packet and asked scornfully:

"Was that why you beat Tony with the snake? You didn't want to lose him because he was young?"

"The lying little devil! He stole from me," the old woman cried furiously. "I only wish I had caught him."

Hester refrained from saying anything further for fear of arousing the woman still more against the Italian boy. She turned to go into the house.

"Good-night," the crone called out calmly, with no touch of malice.

"Good-night." Hester felt compelled to meet the woman's courtesy. That the fortune-teller did not want to quarrel with her was very apparent. Why she wanted to protect her with charms, and in what way she was connected with the mushroom incident were problems too deep for Hester's solving.

"Here's a letter for you, Hester, that looks interesting; that is, the handwriting, for I recognize it," Miss Carstairs cried as the young girl entered the living-room.

"Who's it from?" asked Hester curiously. She looked idly at the address.

"Why don't you open it and see," Miss Carstairs laughed.

Hester slit the envelope and brought forth the letter. She perused it quickly—it was a short note—and turned to her aunt with some excitement.

"It's from Mr. Sherwood, our landlord," she cried. "He wants to know if we will allow him to come and explore some papers he left in one of the drawers of that love of an old escritoire that stands in the upper hall," she finished breathless.

"I remembered his chirography. He makes a very characteristic H. In fact, you can tell pretty much the kind of man he is from his letters," Miss Carstairs mused.

"I can tell from the kind of furniture he buys," Hester declared.

"He might have inherited the furniture," Miss Carstairs offered, smilingly amused.

"Never!" Hester refuted. "All these wonderful things were never an accident. No, indeed. Years of collecting, selecting and discarding placed them here. Their owner, a gentle old bachelor——"

"Why a bachelor?" queried Miss Carstairs.

Hester broke off with a laugh. "Because it sounds well—a gentle old bachelor. I can see him bringing home a bit of plunder, fingering it lovingly and finally disposing it in some spot that was just made for it. I am dying to see him; but, of course, I shall write him a dignified note, cordial but stately. Auntie!" she cried, seized with a sudden inspiration, "wouldn't it be great if he should fall in love with you. Then we could always keep these lovely things."

"Don't be silly, Hester," Miss Carstairs frowned.

Hester laughed mischievously, then, going to the writing-desk, she dashed off a short but welcome note to Mr. Sherwood.

"I'll take a walk to Grantwood in the morning and mail it," she said, blotting the envelope and placing it on the desk. Suddenly a gust of wind blew in at the open window and sent papers and magazines fluttering to the floor.

"How cool the nights are getting," Miss Carstairs shivered. Hester closed the window and threw a light shawl around her aunt's shoulders.

"Shall I read to you?" she asked, and, hardly waiting for the pleased nod of acquiescence she knew would follow the suggestion, she plunged bravely into a scientific thesis that was as clear as crystal to Miss Carstairs, and very soothing. But to Hester the lines were so much Greek. In a clear, somewhat monotonous tone she read on for an hour or more. Then, looking up, she caught her aunt in the act of suppressing a yawn.

"I don't know what makes me so sleepy," Miss Carstairs murmured apologetically. She blinked her eyes and assumed a more upright position. "Up to ten minutes ago I was never more wide awake."

"The sandman's got you, auntie—the sandman and the weather." Hester closed the book. "Listen to that wind! It must be giving us a sample of its fall lines. It's rather nice to be cuddled so snugly between four walls on such a night."

"Miss Hester!" Betty had stepped into the room and was waiting a chance to speak.

"What is it, Betty?"

"Why—why the front door won't latch proper. Will you give it a look?" The maid glanced quickly at Miss Carstairs, and, noting her abstracted look, shook her head significantly at Hester. With a beckoning nod she left the room.

Hester, a bit curious, started to follow. In the front hall Betty said:

"The door is all right, Miss Hester. I didn't want to scare Miss Carstairs." The maid's teeth were chattering, and she spoke in a whisper. "There's somebody in the cellar!"

For a moment Hester's spine felt creepy. Then her confidence returned. "Rats, Betty, and the wind. Also a bit of imagination, I fear." She laughed lightly and was turning back to the living-room, when Betty caught at her dress.

"It's not rats or imagination," Betty refuted indignantly. "Would a rat turn on and off a flashlight?"

"What do you mean, Betty?" Hester was puzzled.

"You know the hole that was left in the storeroom-closet when the ice-chest was moved?" Betty whispered earnestly.

"Yes; where the drain-pipe went through—well?"

"I went in there to put some things away and saw the light. You'd better run up to the telephone and call up the police. I've bolted the cellar-door, the kitchen-door and all the windows. He can't get up or in without breaking something. You can't tell, though, what minute he'll get desperate. Won't you please call the police, Miss Hester?" Betty implored.

Hester hesitated. No doubt Betty had seen a light in the cellar; but it might easily have been a reflected light from outside. The more she thought about it the more certain she felt that that was the clue.

"I will go into the storeroom to be sure, Betty," she said. "We wouldn't want to call for help and then be laughed at. I am not certain that there is a policeman in Grantwood, and if there is, he would have to walk nearly a mile. Come on, we'll investigate, or I'll go alone," she offered, as Betty hesitated.

"You're losing time, Miss Hester; but I won't let you go alone." Betty answered a bit sullenly, following her mistress to the rear of the hall, which connected with a butler's pantry and thence to the kitchen. With her hand on the door-knob of the storeroom-door, Betty reached up and turned off the kitchen light. Then she opened the door softly.

The room was in utter darkness, and Hester was about to speak when her eyes suddenly focused on a round hole of light. Her quick ears caught the sound of something that seemed to have stumbled, and she was sure she heard a mutter. Quite panic-stricken within but calm without, Hester shut the storeroom-door softly and flooded the kitchen with light.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE CALL FOR HELP

"BETTY, you go into the other room and make some pretense to stay with auntie. Now, don't be frightened; no one can get up here. It is early, and I will be able to get help right away. Don't let auntie know that I am going to telephone to the police." Hester spoke softly and stepped softly as she made her way back to the hall. At the door leading into the living-room she stopped.

"Why don't you go to bed, auntie? I'm going up to telephone a message I forgot," she said. Turning, she fairly flew up the stairs to the room where the telephone

stood. Closing the door softly to behind her, she snatched at the receiver, put her lips to the speaking-tube and gasped. She had no idea of who or what to call.

"Hello," she said to gain time. At the impatient "What number?" repeated at the other end, she cried:

"I want a policeman; there is a man in my cellar. This is Ridgefield——"

"Oh," Central corrected politely, "you want the policeman. I will give you his house number; it's his office number also."

"Hello," a tired voice responded to Hester's second call. "You want John? Well, he ain't home. No, I don't know when he will be back. You don't say! A man in your cellar. If that ain't tough luck. I'll tell John when he comes in—that is, if I'm awake. I've got a pesky toothache that's bothered me all day, and what with the washing and the children raising Cain I'm near petered out. I'll write your address down, if you say so."

"Isn't there any one you can suggest that would act for your husband? We are three lone women here," Hester went on desperately, hoping to arouse the woman's interest. "We are at the top of the hill in the Sherwood house."

"Ain't that the limit? I always did say, 'Give me a husband, or give me death,'" John's wife drawled sympathetically. "Three lone females!"

Undecided as to whether she should giggle or scream, Hester slammed the receiver back in place. There was no outside help to be depended upon. They were really three lone women. Hester went out into the upper hall to reconnoiter. First, there was auntie to be disposed of; then she could act openly.

"Auntie dear," she called huskily, trying to keep her tones natural, "aren't you ever coming to bed?"

Miss Carstairs was nearly dozing, when Hester's voice aroused her. She sprang lightly to her feet and smiled at Betty, who was standing over her with arms folded.

"Betty, why aren't you in bed?" she chided. "Are you working too hard? You look pale, Betty. Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm all right," Betty answered in a throaty tone. She did not relax her military pose, and Miss Carstairs looked at her anxiously.

"Run on, Betty," she said kindly; "you're tired."

"You go first, Miss Carstairs, and I'll turn out the lights."

At the top landing, Miss Carstairs paused in amazement; Betty had switched off the lights and followed her so closely that she had nearly trod on her heels.

"You will have heart-failure if you run like that, Betty. Mr. Dark won't hurt you," she said teasingly.

"Where is he?" screamed Betty, looking behind her fearfully. She was trembling with fright. "Oh, I wish it was morning," she moaned.

"Betty, I am ashamed of you," Hester said sternly. "Auntie, why don't you go to bed?" she insisted.

"I'm ashamed of myself," Betty confessed; "but I'm more afraid than anything else. When is that policeman coming?"

"I'm not going to bed until I find out what this is you are trying to keep from me, Hester. I am not a baby to be coddled and put to bed. What has happened? Why is Betty so white and frightened?" Miss Carstairs asked indignantly. "What does she want of a policeman?"

"There's a man in the cellar, if you want to know," Hester answered crossly. "I think it's a shame Betty couldn't control her feelings. Now, there will be three of us to worry. Two was bad enough."

"Are you sure?" Miss Carstairs gasped. "How do you know?"

"He's there, all right," Hester answered crisply. "I heard him and saw his light."

"We must call up the police at once," Miss Carstairs spoke calmly, and started towards the telephone.

"The policeman," Hester corrected; "it's one, and he ain't home, so his wife told me. I just called up. No hope there."

"I wonder if we could attract Mr. Armstrong's attention." Miss Carstairs went into Hester's bedroom and looked across the way. It was dark; not a ray of light in either side of the double house brightened it. "He can't be at home," she said blankly.

"We'll all be killed in our beds, I know it," Betty broke out afresh.

"That's not necessary; we can just as easily die with our boots on," Hester said sarcastically. "Isn't it ridiculous there isn't a soul we know well enough this side of New York City to call upon," she fumed.

"He'll break open the door as soon as we go to bed," Betty cried.

"We aren't going to bed," Hester said sharply. "We will watch the old day out and the new one in. Come on, no one will dare break into a house when all the lights are on and three pairs of feet moving about."

"I'm sick. My head feels as though it was bursting open. I think I'm going to die. I wish you'd send for the doctor," Betty wailed. She had collapsed in a heap on the hall floor, and, with her head in her arms, she was rocking to and fro.

"The very idea!" Hester laughed hysterically, and sprang for the telephone. "Betty, you score one for that inspiration," she cried. The next moment she was talking excitedly with Doctor Margaret, while Miss Carstairs and Betty watched her breathlessly. "Yes, yes; I shall be at the door to let you in. No, I won't fail," she finished gaily.

"Is she coming?" Miss Carstairs asked eagerly, as Hester hung up the receiver.

"Is she coming?" Hester repeated, executing a fair imitation of an Indian dance. "As fast as her machine will bring her, and she is bringing her bridge party with her—two men and another woman. They are also bringing powder, shot, cartridges, guns, pistols—oh, we are going to have a royal time!"

"I hope there will be no shooting." Miss Carstairs' gentle nature rebelled at Hester's gory picture.

"I hope the man doesn't get away before she comes," lamented Betty. She had risen to her feet and was gaining some composure.

"I suppose we'd better go down-stairs and have the lights on when they come," Miss Carstairs suggested timidly.

"Why, of course," Hester agreed, leading the way quite fearlessly, now help was assured, down into the big living-room.

"We'd better stay right here until we hear them at the door," Miss Carstairs suggested. She stood stiff and tense.

"We'll do nothing rash," Hester reassured, taking her stand near her aunt; her own pose was far from relaxed. Betty said nothing, but joined them. The wind shrieked and snarled. It caused the house to give forth strange, eerie sounds that turned the minutes of waiting into hours.

Finally a welcome sound reached their strained ears. It turned into the lane and stopped in front of the house.

Hester was the first to reach the door and welcome the rescuers.

"Take us to the patient," said the doctor breezily, removing her gloves and introducing the party.

"Do you mean it?" Hester asked in astonishment.

"Why, of course. He won't come to us, will he?" she asked briskly.

"This door leads to the cellar." Hester spoke hesitantly. The doctor was very much like a live wire; she wasn't quite sure she wanted to see her in action. But as she spoke the doctor strode to the door she indicated. Before she could unlock it, however, one of the men pushed her aside laughingly and took the lead.

"Stay where you are, Margaret," he said quietly, "until John and I look around a bit." He pushed the button that lighted the cellar.

"All right," the doctor replied meekly. She kept up a rapid fire of light talk on every subject she could think of except that the men were in search of below. They were gone for such a length of time she grew impatient, and, stepping to the door, called to them.

"Coming," they chorused, and presently they tramped up the stairs into the kitchen, a broad grin on their faces.

"Well," she said, "he had flown. Of course, I knew that as soon as you reached the cellar floor. But what were

you searching for? Did you think he was hidden somewhere?"

"We wanted to be sure that our first suspicion was right," John replied. He turned to Miss Carstairs. "My dear lady," he said, altogether too flippantly, Hester felt, "you will be glad to know that no other man has been in your cellar to-night besides Mr. Wood and myself. Every window is fastened, the door is bolted, and if any one had been in there he couldn't possibly have gotten out, except through a crack."

"We will go down and rummage around, so that every one else's mind will be relieved," the doctor proposed. There were few hiding-places in the cellar, as the men pointed out, and they were quickly explored.

"It was too bad to bring you out here on a wild-goose chase," Miss Carstairs apologized. It was quite evident their fears had had no foundation. Hester said nothing; she was quite too dazed. She was positive that some one had been in the cellar. Hadn't she seen the light and heard the sound? Still, she was equally sure that the intruder was no longer there. The door was bolted and all the windows locked. How did he escape?

CHAPTER TWELVE

A BLOOD-STAINED RAG

"I THINK you will be able to sleep untroubled by any unpleasant dreams," Mr. Wood offered cheerfully. "Shall we go up-stairs?"

"My fears are happily allayed," Miss Carstairs returned. "My only regret is that we disturbed your bridge party."

"You added to our pleasure," Mr. Wood insisted laughingly. "We all play about the same, so that anything spicy helps to break a possible monotony. It's not every night we have a chance to chase a burglar. I feel as proud as a moving-picture hero."

Hester summoned a smile to meet Mr. Wood's banter. Not for worlds would she air her doubts for their further amusement.

"Betty," she said, "you run on and prepare some coffee for us. Oh, I'll go first," she laughed, as Betty seemed reluctant to make the first move. Hester ran up the stairs, followed by the others.

So occupied with their own pleasantries, no one had noticed the doctor when she had stooped down and picked up a blood-stained rag. If they had, it would undoubtedly have added to their amusement. Just why she did it, she could not have explained herself. Only a quick glance had assured her that the rag had been around a finger recently wounded. She thrust it deep in her pocket, still unobserved.

A little later, when they were all gathered in the studio-room to enjoy Betty's cake and coffee, the doctor made sure that the rag had not slipped from the fingers of any one present. She had made a laughing excuse to examine Miss Carstairs', Hester's and Betty's hands to her own satisfaction. Her conclusions were not at all reassuring. Still, she felt it best to keep her own council. Betty might have a sweetheart that she had secreted in the basement and let out when Hester had discovered that some one was there. There was no one there now, that was positive. It would be quite safe to leave the women alone, she felt.

"We must be going," she said, jumping up. "Since I've cut out my night practise my days grow longer and longer. It's six o'clock sharp for me these mornings."

"You women are really brave to live out here all alone in this wilderness. Why do you do it?" John asked curiously, as he was taking his leave.

"We wanted the country for my health, and an advertisement led us to this place," Hester replied. "I really think it the loveliest place I was ever in. The telephone keeps us in touch with the world——"

"We are living proofs of that," Mr. Wood interrupted gaily. "We play bridge at the doctor's every Thursday night. I don't wish you another burglar, but even Margaret's cook can't make cake like Betty's."

When they were gone, Hester locked and bolted the door and looked at the window fastenings before she went up-stairs with her aunt and Betty.

Miss Carstairs was ready for bed, and it was not many minutes before she was snoring gently and peacefully in her room.

Hester had gone into Betty's room to look under her bed with her and search her closet.

"There was some one in that cellar, just the same," Betty declared defiantly. "I ain't going to leave my window open to-night, and I'm going to roll the bureau in front of the door after it's locked."

"All right, Betty; pleasant dreams," Hester answered lightly. She was too thoroughly keyed up with the coffee and the knowledge that some one had been in the cellar and mysteriously gotten out to even think of sleep. She found a book to read, and, hurriedly undressing, she propped herself up in bed and tried to forget herself in its perusal.

The book was a popular novel. It held her attention for an hour. Then it became an excellent sedative, her eyelids becoming more and more difficult to manage. Finally, with a little petulant movement, she let the book fall to the floor. Drowsily she reached out and shut off the light. Then, with a contented sigh, she sank back among the pillows.

It was nearly noon when she awakened. Miss Carstairs had been up for hours, and Betty was preparing the day's second meal. Hester stretched luxuriously and yawned lazily. Her eyes fell upon the little clock that stood near her bed, and she bounded to the floor. A half-hour later, fresh as the roses Betty had placed on the table, Hester joined her aunt in the dining-room.

The telephone rang and Betty answered it. "Miss Hester," she called, you're wanted."

It was the doctor, and she wanted to know first of all if they had slept well.

"Never better," Hester answered spiritedly.

"That's fine," the doctor laughed. "Want to ride with me this afternoon? I have several calls to make in your neighborhood, and three down the hill. I'd like to chat with you."

"Oh, I'd love to." Hester was enthusiastic, for the doctor was good company. "We will go by a mail-box somewhere, won't we? I have a note to mail." She had recalled the note she had written to Mr. Sherwood.

"Sure," the doctor replied. "I will call for you about two. Good-by."

"It was Doctor Margaret, and she wanted me to drive with her this afternoon," she explained as she returned to finish luncheon.

It was a little after two when the doctor arrived. She was in a hurry and appreciated Hester's being ready to jump in at once. "It's a corking day," she said. "I've got two rather serious cases on my mind. When they are attended to, I shall feel like talking." They rode part way down the long hill, when the doctor stopped in front of a quaint, artistic-looking little bungalow. Hester had often admired it and wondered what its occupants looked like.

"Mr. Jimmie and his wife live here," the doctor said, springing out. "I may be gone some time. This is one of the cases I spoke of—Mrs. Jimmie. She's just a girl, and very ill. You won't mind waiting?"

"No, no," Hester cried; "don't think of me."

It was several minutes before the doctor returned. She jumped into the car without saying anything. Her mind seemed miles away. She started the car off mechanically.

"Life turns some strange somersaults," she said finally. "I dreaded to go in to-day, for fear of what I might find. Do you know," she said tensely, "I think Mrs. Jimmie is going to live. God! I wish I knew what does it." She drove on to the next stop, and made no comments when she re-entered the car. The third and last stop brought her back to the car, radiant and laughing.

"Twins," she said; "mother doing fine. Born two days

ago. That's the last professional stop. Now we will go to the post-office to get rid of your mail, then we will take a run out across the Hackensack and back. I can afford to squander just about that much time."

"How full your life is," Hester cried admiringly. "You certainly don't have much time to be bored."

"No; I find myself being pretty well entertained," the doctor answered complacently. "When will your car be mended?"

"Why, how did you know it was damaged?" Hester had carefully refrained from mentioning the accident to any one besides those who already knew the circumstance.

"How did I know, Miss Innocent? Evidently you don't take the local papers, or you would know that your little escapade was given two columns of notoriety."

Hester flushed. "I think that's an outrage!" she cried. "What did they say?" she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her indignation.

"They evidently got their facts from what Betty told the repair men from the garage. It was nicely embroidered, of course, to make it stretch two columns. It was quite proper, and you were made out quite a heroine, so don't worry about it. There is something that I am going to tell you that is really worth thinking about."

The doctor stopped the machine and opened a bag that was lying on the seat beside her. She took from it a square piece of linen that was folded inside, and handed it to Hester.

"Do you remember it?" she asked.

"Perfectly," Hester answered. "It is the cloth that was around the mushrooms, or one just like it." She looked at it closely.

"Why do you think so?" the doctor probed.

"Because of the hemstitching. It's too eccentric not to remember. I never saw anything like it on a handkerchief before. We both spoke of it at the Italian's, don't you remember?"

"Yes; but I wanted to see if you did," the doctor replied quietly. She reached into the bag and took out a stained rag. It was a strip torn from a handkerchief. She laid it in Hester's lap. "What do you think of that?"

"It's a mate to the other. How odd. Where did you pick it up?" Hester asked curiously.

"In your cellar last night. I picked it up out of curiosity and forgot all about it until this morning. I was astounded to find that it was exactly like the handkerchief that the toadstools had been done up in. I can't forgive myself for leaving you without a protector last night. That is what I want to talk to you about. You must have a man about the place, if you intend to stay there. You have a desperate enemy. Have you any idea who it is.

"Not the slightest," Hester answered blankly.

"Has your aunt?"

"How could she, when I don't?"

"Did you ever jilt a lover? Or inherit money that some one else wanted? Would your death benefit any one?"

"No, to the first; I don't know, to the second; yes, to the third," Hester answered thoughtfully.

"Ha!" the doctor ejaculated in a satisfied tone. "Now we are getting somewhere. I don't like walking around in circles. Who would benefit by your death?"

"Well, this is my life's history: An orphan at sixteen; a schoolteacher in Boston at twenty-one; broken in health same year; waitress in Denver, trying to regain my health, at twenty-two; pleased eccentric bachelor by never scorching his toast, or overcooking his eggs during six months service, same year. Mr. Caruthers, the eccentric bachelor, was really a dear old gentleman. He left me enough money to make me independent for the rest of my life," Hester finished impulsively.

"Who gets the money if you die?"

"His niece. It goes to her if I die without issue, the will reads."

"We must put a detective on this niece's trail," the doctor spoke with decision.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DOCTOR TAKES A HAND IN HESTER'S AFFAIRS

"BUT she has more money than she knows what to do with," Hester protested. Mr. Caruthers settled a million dollars on her when she was married. I met her at the funeral. She was very nice to me. My fortune would be a mere bagatelle to her."

"Oh, the doctor's tone was less assured. "Then who is it that is responsible for two attempts on your life, and perhaps a third one, if he hadn't been scared away?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"It's one and the same person, I am confident; and whoever it is, carries a handkerchief that is hand-made, and made by some doting person, who has plenty of time on her hands to make such an intricate stitch. Well, I am afraid the knowledge will do us no good, except it proves that you have an enemy that means mischief. You must not stay alone another night. I have just the person you need—a young Irish lad, with the shoulders of a prize-fighter. He is a good chauffeur and not above helping in the garden or about the house."

"I suppose it would be better to have a man about the place." Hester was a bit hesitant.

"You know it will be best. I have already telephoned him to be ready to start to work for you this afternoon. That little bedroom over the kitchen has a window that commands any approach to the cellar or back door. It will be just the place for him. You will be able to sleep easier, if you know you have a good faithful human watch-dog on the premises, and so will I. And, believe me, no bulldog has more tenacity than Mike Belger, the Irish boy I am sending you." The doctor smiled reminiscently and started the car.

"You are a real live wire," Hester smiled, "and I am sincerely grateful to you. Auntie and I decided at first to have some one about the place to help Betty look after things; but I really like to do things, and I just love to drive my own car."

"Drive away and let Mike sit on the back seat, if you want to," the doctor returned, speeding up the car. They rode for some distance in silence; they were going too fast for conversation. The air stung like fine needles. They were on a long, smooth road, over which the car seemed to fly. Finally the doctor slowed down to turn back.

"Like it?" she cried, taking in deep breaths, her eyes aglow.

"Love it!" Hester's cheeks were as red as bitter-sweet berries.

Again the car flew back to the beginning of the speedway.

"It's the best stimulant I know of," the doctor declared, looking at her watch. "Play-time is over," she announced regretfully. As they were nearing The Ridge, they passed Tony trudging up the hill, with a basket on his arm. Hester had not talked with him since she had given him the ride in her machine. She leaned forward and spoke to him.

"Hello, Tony; bringing us some vegetables?" she asked.

Tony smiled, lifted his cap and shook his head.

"Do you know, I think the old fortune-teller woman that lives across from us in the double house knows something about the mushrooms Tony brought us," Hester said, following her thoughts and scarcely realizing she had spoken aloud, until the doctor brought out a sharp

"Why?"

"Because——" Hester stopped, realizing she could say no more without bringing in Tony's name, and she didn't want the doctor to question Tony. She felt that if the boy ever told the truth of what he knew concerning the old woman and the mushrooms, he must tell it of his own free will. So she repeated "Because" in a vague manner.

"Because why?" insisted the doctor.

"Oh, I don't like the way she looks at me," Hester answered in a rather shame-faced way.

"What a child you are," the doctor laughed heartily. "I've never seen her myself but once, and I must say I didn't like the way she looked at me. She is a newcomer

in the neighborhood, and I am always interested in new people. But to my very gracious 'Good-morning' she never made an answer, nor did she look up. I thought she might be deaf."

"She hears very clearly."

"How do you know? Do you know her?" the doctor asked in surprise.

"Slightly. We were hardly settled when she called on us."

"Called on you?" The doctor was puzzled. "I wouldn't have thought her to be a social person."

"Oh, it was not a social call; it was quite professional. She told my fortune."

"Oh, of course; I had forgotten her calling. Of course, she told you that the course of true love never runs smooth, but that all would end happily." Doctor Margaret smiled.

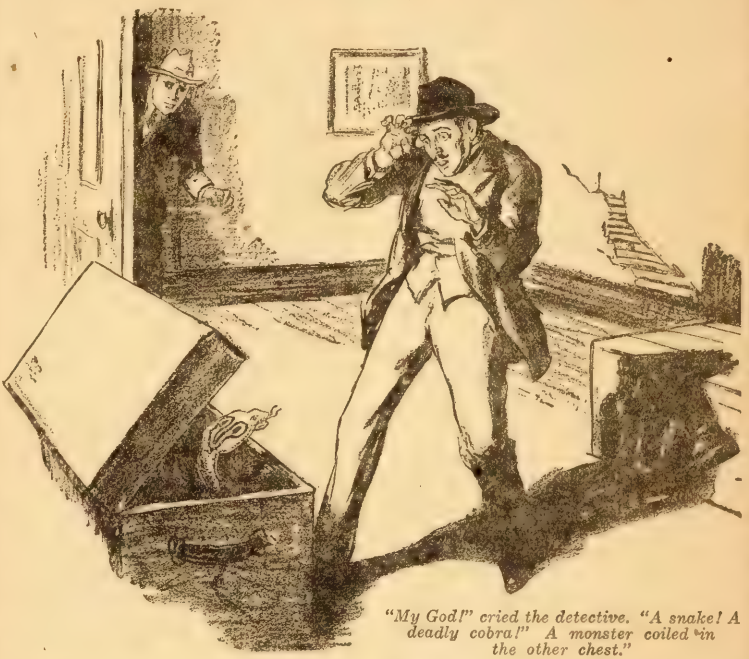
"Yes, Hester answered lightly. She didn't feel like going into detail even with the doctor.

"You have still another newcomer in the neighborhood. You like him, too, don't you? I understand he is writing a novel."

"Mr. Armstrong, you mean, I suppose. How did you know I had met him?" Hester flashed. Armstrong's name had never come up before in any conversation she had had with the doctor.

"Oh, a little bird told me about it." The doctor's amused smile was aggravating.

"I do hate him," Hester cried.



"My God!" cried the detective. "A snake! A deadly cobra!" A monster coiled in the other chest."

The doctor's eyebrows raised. She looked at Hester keenly. "Then why do you take long walks in the woods with him?" she asked coolly.

"I don't!" Hester answered hotly. "That is, I don't take walks with him because I enjoy his company. I have run into him in the woods, and he has walked home with me."

"It's all quite correct to walk with him when and where you choose. I was just interested because the neighbors are building a pretty little romance out of it—bound to, you know, with a pretty new girl in the neighborhood and a smart-appearing young chap, unknown."

Hester's indignation was beyond words. She looked at the doctor and gasped. The latter was studying her in surprise.

"Why, I believe you are in earnest. You don't like him; you really dislike the poor unfortunate young man," she ejaculated. "You make me interested in the young fellow. I shall have to make his acquaintance to find out what causes this repellant power in him," she said lightly.

"Wait a moment and you shall," Hester said suddenly. They had reached her home, and as the car stopped she jumped lightly to the ground, just in time to escape the assistance of a young man who was rapidly crossing the road. She bowed to him smilingly, being quite pleased with herself.

"Mr. Armstrong," she cried, "I want you to meet my friend. Doctor Brewster, Mr. Armstrong," she introduced.

The young man expressed his pleasure at the meeting and turned with a light pleasantry to Hester. The doctor bestowed one swift, critical glance upon him, then looked at her watch.

"My gracious!" she cried; "I've played altogether too long. I must be going on." She gave a sharp glance at the house and garage. "I don't think Mike has come yet. You call up the house and leave word when he does come," she said politely. Nodding a good-by over her shoulder, she started the car.

As Hester turned to go into the house, Armstrong turned to walk in with her.

"Who is Mike?" he asked, casually opening the door and stepping to one side to let her pass in ahead of him. "Mike sounds like first-aid," he continued a bit easily, Hester having made no response. "I wonder if I could get Mike to help me out? The woman I engaged has come just once to clean house. This is certainly a hard place to get help."

"Mike is some one I am engaging permanently," Hester returned. "The work is a little too hard for Betty alone. Besides, winter is coming on and we will have to have a man to shovel snow and run errands."

"Oh, I see. You are lucky; my finances won't allow me to keep a man yet a while. But just wait until my book is out," he said pleasantly.

He was so frankly poor that Hester felt as though she had been crowing. She began to melt, and asked him to have tea with her. His delight was evident. Miss Carstairs joined them, and the young man made himself so agreeable that both Hester and her aunt were almost ready to recant their former opinion of him after he had left.

"I could like him if it wasn't for his eyes," said Hester. "There is something about them that gives me the creeps."

"After all, it is hardly fair to judge any one by a physical defect," Miss Carstairs said gently. "I really believe he wants to be kind and helpful. He was very sincere

when he said he wished he had been here the night of our fright."

Hester had not told her aunt of the doctor's finding the blood-stained rag. She felt it best to leave her in the belief that no one had been there that night. Betty never argued the question. She knew that she had seen a light in the cellar; that was never accounted for, and it made her very careful of the locks and bolts on doors and windows. As Miss Carstairs spoke, Hester's laugh suddenly peeled out.

"Auntie," she cried, "really, we treat Mr. Armstrong as though he were a big daisy, pulling out his petals day by day, saying, 'We love him, we love him not.'"

Miss Carstairs smiled; but before she could speak, Betty appeared to announce that a man at the door, calling himself Mike Belger, wanted to see Miss Hester.

Hester's first impression of Mike was that he was all shoulders, so broad were they. Then, as he spoke to her in his rich, Irish brogue, she looked into his big, ugly face and knew the feeling of relief that comes from the dropping of a somewhat burdensome responsibility. She turned to Betty and told her to be sure and make Mike's quarters comfortable.

"Shure and the docther knew what she was talking about when she said that Miss Hesther was a foine lady," Mike confided to Betty, when Hester had left the room.

"There are those that know a thing or two without having to have the doctor tell 'em first," Betty returned.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MR. SHERWOOD TAKES UP DETECTIVE WORK

TWO weeks passed in the house on The Ridge, the only excitement being caused by a fire, which was discovered in the cellar.

The north side of the double house, with its windows closely curtained, had an air of being untenanted. There was nothing to indicate the presence of the fortune-teller. No smoke issued from the chimneys, though there was frost on the ground. Hester, looking across, shivered at its bleakness. Mr. Armstrong's absence accentuated the gloominess of the double house silhouetted against a cold December sky.

"Did you sleep well, Hester?" Miss Carstairs asked solicitously as they met at the breakfast-table. On Hester's assuring her that she had, her aunt wanted to know what her programme for the day was. It was characteristic of Miss Carstairs to never dwell on an unpleasant subject in the dining-room, so no mention was made of the night's alarm.

Hester decided to curl up on a lounge near the grate-fire and read the better part of the day.

"Our minds run in parallel grooves to-day," Miss Carstairs smiled.

The day would have passed pleasantly monotonous, if it had not been for the advent of Mr. Sherwood. He was welcomed like an old friend.

A fire the night before had broken out in the cellar; but Mike had estinguished it. This subject came up as a topic of conversation, and Hester said that they suspected that an incendiary had visited them.

"That is certainly strange," Mr. Sherwood said. "Of course, some window-fastening must be defective. You have had them carefully examined?" he asked Hester.

"Why, I think they were examined carefully," Hester answered doubtfully. "Mike seems very efficient and responsible.

"Suppose we go down and take a look at them now," he proposed.

Hester jumped up with alacrity. In the basement he turned to her earnestly.

"It seems to me you ought to employ a detective to ferret out the person who started the fire. You know, arson, or attempted arson, is a State's prison offense. It would unveil your unknown enemy and at the same time dispose of him."

"If he or she were caught, yes," Hester agreed; "but I am afraid it would only bring us notoriety."

Mr. Sherwood began a close scrutiny of the window locks. He had tried all but the large one on the north, and found them all doing their work securely. He nodded toward the north window.

"You've put a new lock on that one," he said.

"No; we've not touched the lock."

"That's interesting." Mr. Sherwood stepped up to the window and fingered the lock. "That's an odd-looking affair," he said curiously. "I wonder where it came from? I never saw it before. I don't suppose you have ever especially noticed it before, have you?"

"No; it isn't like the others, is it? Perhaps Betty can tell us if it was on the window when we came." She called her, and Betty hurried down to find out what was wanted. When she was told she said she had noticed some time before that the lock was different from that of the other windows. The cellar had been so immaculate, she said, she had not cleaned it when they moved in. She was quite sure, however, that the lock was not new.

"Was this lock on the first time you took notice of the windows?" Mr. Sherwood asked. He was examining the fastening minutely.

"Yes," Betty answered.

"That's all I wanted to know, thank you," Mr. Sherwood returned pleasantly, and Betty felt herself dismissed.

Mr. Sherwood continued to ply the catch back and forth. Suddenly he touched something accidentally that made the window fly open. He looked gravely at Hester.

"This is the window your prowler came through and left by. He has had access to the house in some way to put in the new lock. It is a clever bit of mechanism. I still don't know how the window happened to open." He closed it and ran his fingers closely over the clasp. Again he touched something that caused the window to spring open. It looked like an ordinary nail; but when he again closed the window and placed his finger on the nail-head it opened wide.

"A remarkable piece of work. It accounts easily for his getting out of the house, locking the window and leaving no trace; but it doesn't explain how he got in. Let us look at the outside of the window." It was an easy step out of the window, and, once outside, Mr. Sherwood pointed to a nail-head that corresponded in position with the one inside. He closed the window and it self-locked. He touched the nail-head spring and the window flew open.

"What do you say to a detective now?" he asked.

"I don't like the idea at all," Hester negatived. "We can nail the window so tightly no one can open it. We don't need it for ventilation. It will be a hint, too, to the person that put the lock on the window that we are looking out for ourselves."

"But are you?" he insisted. "No, you mustn't let any one know that we have made this discovery. Now that we know about it, it is a fine trap. Do you know, detective work has always appealed to me, but I have never had a chance to try it out. How would you like to have me take the case?" he asked.

Hester smiled. "I would love it," she said.

"I mean it," he said gravely. "You are in my home and I feel a deep responsibility for your welfare. I want you to be frank with me and tell me if you can think of any one that could possibly be your enemy."

"Not a soul," Hester said positively. "There is nothing in my life that I care to hide." She gave him a short history of her past just as she had the doctor. "I have never had even the love affairs young girls are usually supposed to have. So there is no jealous or despairing swain wanting vengeance," she finished lightly.

"And there is no one that suspicion points toward?" he said thoughtfully.

"Yes, there is," Hester admitted impulsively. And then she told him without reserve her reasons for believing that the old fortune-teller across the street was the instigator of all the attempts that had been made against her life.

Sherwood listened in amazement. "You have not tried to make the boy Tony talk again?"

"What would have been the use? He wouldn't say anything more. He is too much in fear of the woman."

"The doctor still has the two pieces of linen?"

"Yes; but even she feels they are of little use in locating the criminal."

Sherwood shook his head in despair. "You should have put your evidence into the hands of an expert. Why, your life isn't safe a moment. It's all certainly puzzling. You say you never saw the woman until she came to the house to tell your fortune?"

"Never!" Hester answered emphatically.

"Then it is something more subtle than personal revenge. We will try our best to get to the root of it. First, I am afraid you will have to invite me to remain here for a week or so as your guest."

"Oh, really?" Hester's eyes twinkled. "I am filled with dismay. I don't know whether you mean that we must bore you for a week, or vice versa."

"My fear is that it will be vice versa, but you must make the best of it, for I am going to slay the dragon," he laughed.

"I wish we could keep the knowledge from auntie that you are here for any detective purpose. She has such positive faith in the voice from the valley that she feels nothing really dreadful can ever happen to us. You know, she is clairvoyant, and it has warned her in time twice, when most serious results would have happened without it. She seems to hear the mysterious warning voice; but I can't."

"I agree with you that it would be unwise to cause Miss Carstairs any worry or annoyance. Can't we invent the polite fiction that I am doing some copying. It sounds vague, but interesting and possible."

"We will tell her now, and Betty shall make you comfortable."

"Wait; if we are going to be detectives we must be methodical. First—"

"You put it in the plural and there is only one detective," Hester protested.

"First," he went on calmly, "you must say nothing about the window to Mike, Betty, your aunt or anybody. Second, no one but yourself must know that I purpose to stay here more than one night at a time. Thirdly, I want a cot brought down to the cellar with a blanket or two."

"Horrors! You aren't going to sleep down here, are you?" Hester cried in dismay. "Really, I think that is carrying things too far. Why not have Mike sleep here and call you if anything happens?"

"Did Mike discover the secret spring in the window?" he asked with mock haughtiness. "Would you have me hide my light under a bushel, or bury my talent in a napkin?"

"No, indeed," she laughed in spite of herself. He was quite too droll with his mock heroics. She would not oppose him further, but she did not approve of his sleeping in the cellar and inviting trouble. It was another thing to have Mike do it. Of course, Mr. Sherwood was robust and strong; indeed, he had a fine physique, but somehow she couldn't explain it definitely to herself; his doing such a thing was different.

"How are you going to sleep in the cellar without Betty's knowing it?" she asked.

"That's a poser," he acknowledged. "I shall never have to be an artful dodger. What time does she usually visit the basement mornings?"

"I have no idea," she responded.

"Mike comes in at six to fix the fire. He told me so. I don't think Betty antedates him. I will fold my cot about five-thirty, go around to the front door and let myself in with a pass-key, muss up my room, and appear tranquilly at the breakfast-table."

"How about the cot?"

Sherwood smiled and pointed to the ceiling, where two army cots were stored in straps. "Just as I left them," he said. "This tool-box will be just the place to store a couple of blankets. I am going to leave that accomplishment to you."

Miss Carstairs beamed when Mr. Sherwood accepted her invitation to remain to dinner. He contrived to bring up the subject of books, and expressed his desire to do some copying from an old manuscript. This led to her farther delight by his graceful acceptance of her invitation to remain over the night and begin work in the morning.

In the early evening Mike took Betty in the car to Grantwood for the last mail and necessary groceries. The whir of the departing machine penetrated into the studio-room, where Miss Carstairs and their guest were enjoying a friendly discussion of antique art, with Hester an interested listener.

The sound did not disturb Miss Carstairs or their guest, but it brought Hester to her feet with a smothered ejaculation. Now was her time to act. With a hasty excuse she left the room and rushed up-stairs. Going to the linen-closet, she secured two warm blankets, and quite stealthily tiptoed back down the hall to the rear stairway that led to the kitchen. Safe in the kitchen, she stopped to smile over her neat accomplishment.

Knowing that Betty and Mike would not be gone long, she hastened outside and hurried to the north window. It was black as pitch outdoors, but the tiny glare of a pocket flashlight kept her from stumbling. The same light guided her fingers to the spring that automatically opened the north window. Feeling very much like an adventuress, she dashed over to the tool-chest and deposited the blankets within it. Resisting a desire to pull down one of the cots and make it really comfortable for the young man who would occupy it, she fled back to the window she had left open, and passed through it. A touch on the outside spring closed it, and, with a little relieved laugh, she turned to run back to the kitchen-door.

She had taken one step, when something fell upon her shoulders, completely covering her head and smothering her outcries. It drew tighter and tighter as she struggled in a pair of powerful arms and fought their grip of iron. In spite of her resistance, she felt that she was being dragged some distance. She soon found that if she made no attempt to scream the frightful pressure on her mouth relaxed enough to give her one precious life breath. Fearing that she might be choked senseless, she remained quiet.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HESTER'S DISAPPEARANCE

UP-STAIRS the conversation suddenly terminated as Miss Carstairs abruptly jumped to her feet and ran out into the hall, calling wildly:

"What is it, Hester? I am coming." Not waiting for an answer, she hurried up-stairs to her niece's room. "Hester," she called, "where are you?" Running from room to room with growing fear, she continued to call. Finally she returned to the studio-room, trembling with fright. "Where can Hester be?" she cried, wringing her hands piteously. "She isn't up-stairs."

Her clairvoyant power had manifested itself again.

Surprised at the exhibition of hysteria, without any just cause, and feeling a bit guilty, for he was quite sure Hester had gone to get his blankets and was now undoubtedly putting them in the tool-chest, Sherwood suggested the possibility of her having gone down the back stairs.

"She has gone out for a breath of fresh air and will be back presently, laughing at your fright. Let us go out and join her," he urged, quite at a loss to understand the strained attitude of listening Miss Carstairs had assumed. He took her arm gently, but she drew away from him, staring at him as though he were a stranger.

"Hurry," she gasped suddenly, "that's the message. Oh, will you hurry? The voice calls to hurry. Something has happened to Hester." She ran out into the night and stood bewildered by its blackness. "What shall we do?" she moaned. "Where has she gone? Where shall we look? Hester, Hester!" she called wildly.

"Please don't, Miss Carstairs; please don't worry so, we will find her," Sherwood soothed in a calm, reassuring tone. He could not himself understand why Hester did not respond to the shrill calls of her aunt. A bit of fear was communicating itself to him. He tried to shake off the feeling in vain. It persisted in spite of his knowing there was no cause for it. He led the way to the north window and touched the spring. The window opened. He stepped inside and cried softly:

"Miss Carstairs. Hester, are you there?" The silence brought an uneasy feeling of premonition. He turned to his companion.

"Miss Carstairs, please remain here a moment while I search the basement. She might be hiding, you know," he suggested. Switching on all the lights, the young man made a hurried search through the few partitions of the cellar. It was not until he had made sure that she was not there that he realized how morbid he had grown. Returning to Hester's aunt, he suggested that they walk down the lane.

"There really is no reason to worry, because a perfectly healthy, normal girl disappears from her home for a short time. Really, Miss Carstairs, she has been gone but a short time."

"Something has happened to her," Miss Carstairs said dully. "The voice never warns without reason."

Sherwood looked at her helplessly. Her face was so drawn and white he feared she might faint. They were standing at the bend, where Hester's accident with the car had occurred, the arc light above accentuating her ghastliness. The sound of an approaching car cheered him. His hope was realized when it drew near enough for him to recognize its occupants. The car stopped.

"Two for you and three for Miss Hester," Betty cried, waving in the air a handful of mail.

"Hester is lost," Miss Carstairs said solemnly.

Mike and Betty looked at her, not at all comprehending her words.

Sherwood explained quickly that Hester had gone out somewhere and that her aunt feared something had happened to her.

"I do not fear; I know it. The voice told me," Miss Carstairs insisted in a low, tense voice.

Betty was now as white as her mistress, and a strange look of fear spread over Mike's face. Again Mr. Sherwood was seized with a feeling of panic. He turned to Miss Carstairs.

"Let Mike take you and Betty home," he said quietly, "so that you will be there when your niece returns. I will go to the end of the lane and Mike can come back with the car for me. We will search the roads and by-paths till we find her. She may have strolled down Edgewater Road; the lights along it make it a charming walk, even on a dark night." He knew that he was talking folly—sheer idiocy to think that a girl would walk down it alone. But where was she?

He followed the lane to its end and stared into the black woods beyond. Impossible that she was in there; but imagination made him shiver. Mike was calling him, and he got into the car.

"All the roads first," he said shortly.

The car bounded forward. When they passed the double house, dark and gloomy, Mike shook a doubled fist toward it. Sherwood noticed the gesture, but made no comment. Hester's revelation had made him turn troubled eyes in the same direction. At the end of twenty minutes' fruitless searching, he told Mike to return to the house.

"She may have returned," he said hopefully. If she hadn't he would never forgive himself for not sending for a real detective at once, when she told him her doubts of the fortune-teller.

She had not returned. Sherwood was staggered, and for a moment he allowed his feelings to get the better of him. Just how much she had grown to mean to him since their short acquaintance he now fully realized. He looked at his watch at Miss Carstairs' request. Yes, she had been gone fully three-quarters of an hour.

"What shall we do?" Miss Carstairs asked dully.

It aroused him to action. Forcing a smile of reassurance, he hurried to the telephone and called up the Burns Detective Agency, leaving a hurry-up call. Then he stepped into the back hall and called Betty. When she joined him, he bade her look into her mistress' room and find out if Hester took a wrap with her.

Betty shook her head. "It's no use. I've looked already. Nothing is touched in her room and in the cloak-room nothing has been taken, not a sweater or a scarf. She must be freezing."

"All right, Betty; you'd better look after Miss Carstairs. I'm going out with Mike again."

Outside he asked Mike to get a couple of lanterns.

"You don't suppose Miss Carstairs could have gone into a neighbor's house, do you?" he asked, when Mike returned with the lights. The reflected light from the window of a house some distance away had given him the thought.

"Miss Hesther don't know the neighbors, and what for would she be out this cowld night, wid no hat nor coat on?"

"Why, indeed?" Sherwood felt the impotence of further questioning. Bidding Mike pick out every dark or hidden spot, with the light of one of the lanterns, he took the other one and went to the north basement window to examine the adjacent ground. The two blankets he had found in the tool-chest were silent witnesses of Hester's visit to the cellar, and he felt she must have left it by the secret window passage.

A minute scrutiny of the ground revealed nothing unusual. There were several footprints that might have been his own, Hester's, or those of the marauder who had built the basement fire. There was nothing distinguishing about them; they told nothing new. He threw the rays of the light in larger circles. A broken shrub caught his eye; it had been recently broken. He bent down to examine it more closely and found a torn bit of silk clinging to one of the splinters.

Shocked, all his fears confirmed, he placed the bit of evidence in his pocket. It was without a doubt a fragment torn from the rose-pink silk that Hester had worn when she left the studio-room. Raising the lantern on high, he could see beyond the shrub a zigzag path that was quite distinct on the partly frozen grass. It looked as though an object had been dragged over it.

The impression followed to the fence, where it stopped abruptly. Two deep imprints were on the other side where the ground was softer, and then came Edgewater Road. Sherwood stopped and looked blankly at the hard, smooth road. It told no tales. For a moment he stood stricken with the hopelessness of trying to pick up a trail along its track. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, he crossed the road and ran up the cinder-path that led to the fortune-teller's side of the double house.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE CARDS ARE READ FOR SHERWOOD

SHERWOOD pounded on the door and rattled the knob in a strange frenzy of rage. Receiving no response to his repeated knocks, he went around to the side of the house. The blinds were closed and not a glimmer of light leaked out from within. The back was equally dark and silent. He started to turn away, when he was positive he heard a noise inside the house. Like an insane man he sprang to the door and pushed with all his strength against it. Again and again he hurled his strength against the barricade until he felt it give.

Gathering his strength for a last effort, he was staggered to see the door opening as though of its own volition. It opened to its full width and an ugly, misshapen creature stood before him with a lighted candle in her hand. He knew at once that it was the fortune-teller.

"What do you want?" she asked in a mild, low tone.

"What do you mean by coming to the house of a helpless old woman at this time of night?" She held the candle high to keep it out of the draft that threatened to extinguish it.

Confused by her mildness and the evident fact that he had routed her out of bed and a deep sleep, Sherwood was tongue-tied. It was impossible that this sleepy, crippled old crone could have had a hand in Hester's disappearance. She continued to stare at him out of little, beady eyes.

"Miss Carstairs has disappeared—I——"

"Why didn't you say so at once. You want the help of the cards? Come in and they will find her for you. How long has she been gone?" the woman asked in a brisk, business-like manner.

Obeying an impulse he did not stop to question, the young man walked into the room and allowed the old crone to shut the door. She pointed to a chair and reached for a pack of cards, which she began to shuffle rapidly.

"How long has Miss Carstairs been gone?" she asked crisply.

"Not an hour," Sherwood gasped, as though under a shower-bath. "I must go," he cried, springing to the door.

"The cards will tell you where she went," the crone went on evenly. The deck was spread out on the table before her. "Which Miss Carstairs?" she asked excitedly. "The cards speak only for a young woman—a girl. Is it Miss Hester?" she cried.

Sherwood nodded, hesitating at the door and held by a curiosity he could not resist.

"The queen of hearts—jack of spades—ace of diamonds—clubs, many of them—some fighting." She went through the cards too rapidly for Sherwood to follow. He looked at her in stupid wonder, until she looked up and favored him with a keen, rapier-like glance. He again felt as though he were being douched with water. Her uplifted finger stayed his hand on the door-knob.

"Money is at the bottom of her disappearance. The money she inherited brings woe to all who possess it. She is in the hands of a wicked man, the jack of clubs. He will return her to the jack of hearts in one, perhaps two, days, safe and sound, if she rids herself of the tainted money. Now, go!" the woman finished harshly.

Sherwood stumbled out of the house in a chaotic state of mind. Was the woman faking, or did she have some occult power? Was there a hidden meaning in all she said, and if so, what could it be? Did she know where Hester was? That thought made him clench his fists and half turn back.

"You go into the house," came a soft whisper. It was Mike; he joined Sherwood and they walked out to the road. "I saw you and waited outside to smash in if I heard you holler. You didn't learn nothing, of course."

"No," Sherwood returned shortly but kindly. He and Mike walked on in silence.

"I always thought this Ridge was a nice place to live on whin things was going well, but it's sure desolate whin they're all wrong," Mike offered. "I've looked everywhere and there ain't a thing to do but wait till daylight and that city detective fellow comes."

"No; I'll go in and try to comfort Miss Carstairs a little, if it's possible. You had better try and catch a bit of sleep. To-morrow will be a hard day for you."

"You think we ain't going to find her right off in the morning?" Mike asked uneasily.

"I don't know."

It was nine o'clock before help came from the city. Sherwood and Hester's aunt had made a pretense of breakfasting; the former had been busy since early dawn calling up friends and acquaintances with the vain hope that something might be learned of Hester's whereabouts. Miss Carstairs was like one stricken. She seemed bewildered and helpless. Her dependence on Sherwood was pathetic.

The detective, a slim, hawk-eyed man, listened impatiently while Sherwood told him of Hester's activities the previous evening up to the time of her disappearance. His brows raised skeptically when Sherwood told him of the attempt to poison the household with toadstools disguised as mushrooms. He was interested in the doctor's finding of a linen rag in the cellar that corresponded with the linen handkerchief that was wrapped around the toadstools. He listened attentively to the recital of the fire in the root cellar and the discovery of a secret spring that opened and shut a window supposedly locked tight.

"The plot is a deep one," he said. "Perhaps the case isn't as simple as I thought. I had imagined an elopement, or a run for the red lights. Most of these disappearing cases pan out that way in the end."

Sherwood led the way to the north window and pointed out the trail that led west to the road. He produced the rose-colored silk that he had taken from the broken shrub, explained the mechanism of the window, and told of Hester's suspicions of the old fortune-teller who lived in the house opposite.

The sleuth plodded in and out of the basement, took measurements of the path to the road, questioned Betty till she was close to hysteria, and cross-questioned Mike until he was surly. Miss Carstairs he left undisturbed. But the doctor, who had hurried to the house as soon as she was free, was catechized closely. Finally he turned to Sherwood and anounced that he was going to find the Italian boy Tony, and would have Mike take him in the car.

When he had gone, Sherwood related to the doctor his late experience with the fortune-teller and what she said the cards told about misfortune following those who inherited Caruthers' money. The young man felt strongly attracted to the doctor, because of her genuine affection for the missing girl. He talked to her far more freely than he had to the detective, and she, reading between the lines, felt her heart going out to him in deep sympathy. When he had finished telling her of the taint that the old crone had said was on Caruthers' money, she recalled a bit of gossip that had been told her recently.

An old girlhood friend had been visiting her and the doctor had idly mentioned Hester and the legacy she was enjoying. To her surprise it was old news to her friend, who, though she had never met Hester, was intimately acquainted with Mr. Caruthers and his niece, to whom he had given a million dollars on her wedding-day. It seemed that the niece had married a man who was outwardly attractive, but at heart a scheming, dangerous man. He was dissipated and extravagant, and his wife's money had seemed to turn his head.

At any rate, so her friend said, he speculated wildly and squandered one way and another the larger part of her fortune. He had been furiously disappointed when Caruthers left the remainder of his money to a stranger. He had counted on the money to recoup his straitened condition; he had fully expected to refill his pockets when the eccentric old bachelor died. He had acted very nasty to his wife and she believed there was an estrangement between the two.

"All of which does not go to prove that any taint lies on the Caruthers fortune," Sherwood said thoughtfully. "But it does put another meaning to what that old witch read from the cards. She said Hester would be returned safe and sound if she gave up the money that was willed to her. She must have been kidnaped and is being held prisoner until ransomed by herself. Now, no one but the man you have spoken of is in deep need of her money. Do you suppose the old hag is in his pay? That she tried to compass her faith first, and, not succeeding, is planning to make her give the money up through accident?"

"Who gets the money if Hester dies?" the doctor asked sharply.

"Caruthers' niece."

"And that practically means her husband. I feared it, and the fact accentuates my terror as to Hester's fate. If she has fallen into his hands, what is to prevent him from making away with her? The money would come to him naturally. I wish I could feel as optimistic as you do. But think of the risk he would run after he had let Hester go, if he had first coerced her into giving up her legacy.

"Think of the greater risk he runs if her life is taken. The woman already knows she is under suspicion, and I fully believe she was trying to reassure me of Hester's safety by reading the cards as she did. Money is what the man wants most of all, and undoubtely the woman is in his pay. If she could have compassed Hester's death without suspicion falling upon her, she would have done so willingly, the several attacks she has made being sufficient proof of that. Now, I believe Hester will be held only until she ransoms herself."

"What if she refuses?"

"It won't matter. She is given one or two days, according to the cards. We will rescue her by then and bring the woman to justice. I hope we get the man; but he may be too clever."

The doctor shook her head doubtfully. "Don't think of revenge," she said. "Put all your wits together in just finding Hester."

"Don't you know that I want to find her more than you do, or than any one else does?" he said tensely. "But her tormentors are not going unpunished."

The doctor nodded sympathetically.

The return of Mike and the detective brought new developments. Tony had been induced to talk only when he had been given his choice of being turned over to the police, or forget his fear of the fortune-teller. He admitted that on the way to the Carstairs home with the mushrooms the old woman had called to him and insisted on his coming into her house. She had plied him with good things to eat, and he remembered putting the mushrooms on the floor beside him, so that he could use his fingers.

It was not until he saw the linen cloth the toadstools had been wrapped in that the significance of the old woman's inviting him to her house and plying him with good things to eat dawned upon him. He had accused her of substituting the poisoned toadstools for his father's fresh mushrooms. She had struck out at him with a long snake she was playing with.

The boy's statement proved beyond a doubt that it was the old crone who had frightened Betty and Hester by prowling in the basement the night the doctor picked up the bloody rag. She had free access to the house at any time through the north window. She must have set fire to the house, placed the log in the shadow of the arc light, and, if she had not been the one to spirit Hester away, she could tell who did.

"We will proceed to give her the third degree," said the detective pleasantly.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FRUSTRATED

"I'M with you," Sherwood cried promptly.

"I'll need both your help and Mike's," the detective returned. "You see, I'm not doing this thing according to Hoyle. It would take too long to go through a lot of red tape; the bird might be gone."

"What's your plan?" Sherwood eyed the sleuth with growing respect.

"Very simple. We will just cross the road, break in the door, if it isn't opened instantly, and demand the girl. If she refuses to tell where she is, we will make her tell," he finished with a quizzical smile at the doctor who was listening with frank curiosity.

"I wish you success," the doctor returned gravely, and went in to Miss Carstairs.

Feeling a new confidence in the hawk-eyed man, who was not only willing but eager to take the law into his own hands and act at once, Sherwood hastily unburdened himself of the doctor's late confidence. The detective emitted a low whistle of surprise.

"So that's the reason—money. It's always money or love that starts every crime on the calendar. It's the nephew-in-law of the man Caruthers, who is at the bottom of all the trouble, and the fortune-teller is his tool. It won't take us long to make her tell all she knows," he added grimly. "We'll have the girl back in her home before night."

The house was silent as it had been when Sherwood had called earlier in the morning. Repeated knocks brought no response. The window blinds were still closed. Sherwood suggested their going to the back door to force their way in, as it was of a flimsy make, while the front door was of solid oak. The detective placed Mike at the front door in case he should be needed there, while he and Sherwood went around to the rear.

It took but a moment to shatter one of the door panels, insert a hand into the fracture and unbolt the door. The two men sprang into the room that was artificially darkened by heavy draperies fastened over the windows. The detective took out a pocket light and flashed it into every corner of the room. The place was empty. Sherwood sprang to a stairway that led out of the tiny entrance in front. There were two rooms above, both empty. He returned to the room below.

There was no sign of a hasty departure. The room was in immaculate order, except for a cotton dress that lay huddled in one corner as though kicked there by some one too hurried to care for it. Sherwood picked it up hastily and dropped it again with an expression of loathing. It was as though the thing was animate. The back of the waist was longer than the front, and as he held it out it had taken the hump-backed shape of the old fortune-teller.

"My God!" cried the detective, springing up from a chest he had opened. He had slammed the cover down at lightning speed and looked at Sherwood with horror in his eyes. "A snake—a deadly cobra! A monster coiled in the chest. Its neck was inflated; I touched the hood. Thank God, I was quickest. Why do you suppose that creature surrounds herself with snakes?" He rushed to the windows and pulled down the shades from their hangings.

"We'll let in a little daylight. Oh!" he screamed, and made a diving jump that landed him on top of the chest. There he stood, pale and resolute. "Did you see it?" he asked quietly.

"What, another snake?" Sherwood asked, a bit ironically.

"Yes, here's a huge rattlesnake. Just pulled it out of the top drawer of this writing-desk. See its rattles?" He pointed to two horny joints at the end of a long piece of leather that was cunningly shaped to simulate a snake. "Strange woman! It was, no doubt, an imitation whip she frightened the Italian boy with."

"But I saw this one raise its head. The box-lid lifted. We will fasten the lid down to prevent further trouble," he said laconically, his nerve returning. "You don't find anything, no papers?" He carefully pinned in place a staple that was dangling from the chest-lid, then continued his search. A quick visit to the rooms above brought no new development. He pulled out the drawers of the one chest that was up-stairs and found an odd mixture of clothes and toys.

The old woman seemed to have an obsession for artificial spiders and snakes. The clothing was coarse, but clean. There were no incriminating or illuminating papers. He pulled the bed to pieces with no more enlightening result. He was grave when he joined Sherwood below and opened the door for Mike to come in.

"We are no wiser than we were before we came," he said. "You were hot on the trail when you came here in the night. The girl was not far away, I believe. The old woman is either scared and has run away, or she is just laying low until the money question is settled. I can do no more here; I'm going to catch the first train to Albany and shadow Caruthers' nephew-in-law. I'll telegraph you my location as soon as I know it, and you can let me know if anything turns up here."

Sherwood returned to the house to let Miss Carstairs know what had been done. In a panic he was ready to go against the detective's advice and inform the police of Hester's disappearance. He felt he must have Miss Carstairs' consent first. When he broached the subject to her, she begged him to wait. She was weak from the shock,

but soon she would be stronger and the voice, she felt, would tell her where Hester was.

She had felt communication waves several times during the morning, but had not been able to decipher them. "Come," was the dominant word, and she felt something dragging her. She had gone to the north window of the basement, and from there had followed a zigzag path that led to the road in front. There she became confused by what seemed contradictory orders, and she had given up in despair and returned to the house.

The day dragged interminably to Sherwood, who was forced to inactivity. He dare not leave the house or premises, for fear of missing a message, direct or indirect concerning Hester. It was late in the afternoon when the telegram came that he had been anxiously waiting for. It read:

"SHERWOOD—Barking up wrong tree. Nephew-in-law fine fellow. Great friends with wife—good-natured, easy-going. Doctor's friend all off. Must look for new clue. Back to-night. PETERS."

Sherwood felt as though he had been walking in a great circle that began nowhere and ended there. He was still dazed from Peters' report, when Betty said there was a policeman at the door who wanted to see Miss Carstairs.

"Of course, he can't. I will be there in a minute. Don't let him come in. Miss Carstairs might hear him, Betty."

"Don't worry; I'll keep him out. But he might know how to find Miss Hester," Betty pleaded. "We oughtn't to miss any chance."

"I'll speak to him at once," Sherwood said wearily. He had no faith in the stupid-looking officer that was waiting for him outside.

"Hear you've been having some excitement up here on The Ridge. Thought it might be worth a trip up the hill to look into it. Girl eloped, or committed suicide?" the policeman greeted.

Sherwood felt that it was too late to keep back publicity from the household now. He told in as few words as possible all that he knew concerning Hester's disappearance. He positively refused to allow Miss Carstairs to be interviewed by any one. The officer was impressed by Sherwood's disclosure and started out on his return trip with an air of importance. He button-holed every citizen he met and imparted the news to him or her, with the additional statement that he was now on his way to get together a posse and search for the missing girl. Then, having attended to his duty as officer of the law, he quickened his pace until he reached the rear room of a poolroom. There he remained till the small hours of the next day, playing poker with a few old friends.

Sherwood felt he couldn't pass another night inactive. Hester had been gone now nearly twenty-four hours, and they were no nearer finding her than when she went away. He couldn't reasonably expect to see Peters before early the next morning. He took a melancholy satisfaction in going over to the double house alone and again searching for incriminating or enlightening papers. But not a scrap could be found. If the woman carried on any correspondence, she had effectually destroyed it all.

Drawer after drawer he opened, exposing the gruesome spiders and snakes within. Once he started to open the chest, where the hooded cobra that frightened Peters reposed in all its loathsomeness; but a glimpse of something in the corner near the dress that lay in a heap aroused a greater curiosity. He crossed to it quickly and picked it up. It was a small pocket light, and his quick eye caught the initials "H. C." raised in silver on the side.

For a moment he could not breathe, so conflicting were the emotions that stirred him. Hester had picked up the light from a reading-table the night before when she was leaving the room. He had idly noted her doing so while talking with her aunt. Now the pocket light was in this room, silent witness to her having been here, or it might have been wrenched from her hands somewhere else and thrown on the floor with the dress.

Feeling completely baffled with the result of his find, Sherwood prepared to leave by the back door, when he heard a light, springy walk on the cinders outside. Some one was approaching the door. There was a light, rapid tattoo on its panel. Sherwood opened the door.

"Oh!" a voice that was strange to him expressed astonishment. "Where is the madam?"

Sherwood tried to see the caller's face, but it was too dark. Resorting to Hester's pocket light, he played it on the stranger's features. What he saw was nothing unpleasant.

"Do you mean the fortune-teller?" he asked, wondering if the fellow had come to have the cards read.

"Yes," the man said with an easy smile; "I'm Tom Armstrong, her neighbor. I've just arrived, and I find I haven't a match. Perhaps you can accommodate me."

Sherwood did so, and then he told him of Hester's disappearance. Armstrong was shocked. He expressed the deepest sympathy and offered to do anything he could to find the young girl he so deeply respected and admired.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE INSISTENT VOICE

WHEN Sherwood returned to the house on The Ridge, Betty said that Miss Carstairs had been asking for him. He hurried to her room and found her calm and collected. She smiled a gentle greeting.

"You have had no sleep since Hester left, have you?"

"No; I am not sleepy, Miss Carstairs."

"That won't do," she said resolutely. "We are going to find Hester before morning. I don't know why, but I feel that you are going to be the one to do it. But you must have strength to persevere. The voice says, 'Search.' Will you promise me to go direct to your room and lie down with your eyes closed until I call you?"

"I will," Sherwood answered. He had not realized until she spoke how exhausted he was. He couldn't sleep, but he felt that rest was what he needed to put him in shape for another day. He wanted to be at his best, and ready for any emergency that might arise. "Have you taken any rest?" he asked in deep concern. She was so pale and transparent, a touch of rough wind could blow her away, he felt.

"I had to rest to conserve my best energy and strength. At twelve I will be ready to be guided by the voice," she said solemnly. "Now rest."

With an odd, almost exultant, feeling, Sherwood went to his room to fulfil his promise to Miss Carstairs. Had some one abruptly asked him if he really believed the voice Miss Carstairs spoke of could be instrumental in leading them to Hester, he would have shaken his head in gentle cynicism. But no questions had been asked. She had asked him to rest, so that he would be ready to help her.

He closed his eyes and relaxed his body, but his senses remained alert. No sound within or without the house escaped him. He heard the door-bell ring and caught a hurried conversation between Peters, who had evidently been the one to ring, and Betty.

"No; you can't see any one until twelve o'clock. Those are Miss Carstairs' orders," he heard the latter cry.

"I'll come in and wait, then," Peters replied.

Sherwood sprang from his bed in eager excitement to talk with the detective, when he remembered his promise to Miss Carstairs. Torn between the desire to keep his given word and the feeling that every moment he put off meeting Peters he was delaying the search for Hester, Sherwood hesitated in despair.

A knock on the door decided him. He must see Peters at once. He sprang to open the door and found Miss Carstairs there. She nodded.

"It's time," she said. "Come."

There was something so impelling in her tone that he followed without giving a further thought to Peters, who was down in the kitchen, enjoying a cup of hot coffee while he waited.

Out the front door Miss Carstairs passed, with Sherwood close in her wake, down the steps and around to the north window. There she stopped a moment, as though getting her bearings, then she followed the zigzag impression on the grass to the fence. Without a moment's hesitation she continued straight across the road to the cinder-path that led to the fortune-teller's side of the double house. Here she made a detour that brought her to the kitchen-door in the back.

Sherwood had followed with ever-growing wonder. He had tried to keep a light on the path before her to prevent her stumbling; but he had soon found that she was not depending on material light to guide her steps. Once he had caught a glimpse of her face and saw that her eyes were closed. It was then his awe and wonder began. With the aid of a lantern he had stumbled more than once over the deep ruts and stones in their passage; and she had walked, silent, with head erect, as swiftly and smoothly as though she were trodding on velvet turf.

With no hesitation, she passed through the small kitchen into the larger room in front, out into the tiny entrance hall, Sherwood closely following; up the stairs and into the two connecting rooms at the top she went. Direct, obeying an impulse that evidently had a positive purpose, she walked to the farther room and stopped in front of an old-fashioned clothes-press, ugly and ponderous, that extended from the ceiling to the floor. Its doors were wide open and its interior empty. She raised an arm in an abortive movement, then let it suddenly drop at her side.

"It's gone!" she cried wildly, turning and staring past Sherwood. "Oh, it was you!" she gasped. "In another moment I would have had Hester in my arms. You have always dulled my vibrations. Why couldn't you wait?"

The room was suddenly flooded with light and the pleasantly modulated voice of Tom Armstrong answered:

"I am sincerely sorry you think so illy of me, Miss Carstairs. I heard footsteps in here and came to see what was up," he apologized.

"If you had only waited a moment," Miss Carstairs moaned.

"What does she mean?" Armstrong asked, as Sherwood turned a puzzled face toward him. Sherwood did not answer. He could not. A moment ago he was keyed up to expect anything. He would not have been surprised if Hester had materialized out of the ether; but now the strong light and Armstrong's cool, slightly quizzical tone made him feel the folly of such belief.

"Shall we go back to the house, Miss Carstairs?" he urged gently. Her strained attitude of listening plainly worried him. Was she in her right mind, he wondered. Armstrong evidently had the same thought, for he also urged her to go home and rest, at the same time raising a finger to his forehead and looking significantly at Sherwood.

"Search!" exploded Miss Carstairs suddenly. "Mr. Sherwood," she said quietly, "have patience, and you will find her. This clothes-press holds the secret of her whereabouts. All that we have to do is to search it until we find her."

Sherwood looked at her pityingly. She was mad without a doubt. "Yes, yes," he said soothingly; "I will continue the search, but first I must take you home."

"I shall not go until we find her. Will you please search?" she cried tensely.

"She is mad. Do you want me to help you take her home by force before she harms any one?" Armstrong whispered, coming close to Sherwood.

"No; I shall humor her," Sherwood replied shortly. He approached the wardrobe and ran his fingers over its empty shelves. It was useless and foolish, but he would go over it carefully until she was satisfied. Then she would be more willing to go home. Over every inch of the wood his hand traveled before he shut the two front doors. Wondering if she was satisfied now, and, waiting for her to speak, he idly tapped an ornamental wooden button at the side of the clothes-press.

To his horror the big piece of furniture seemed about to topple over. He sprang to Miss Carstairs to drag her out of its way, and at the same instance Armstrong, with a startled cry, rushed out of the room. The clothes-press continued to move slowly and easily, until it made an opening into a room beyond. Sherwood and Miss Carstairs were through the aperture in a trice.

The room was dimly lighted by the rays from the other room that came through the opening. It was sufficient to outline a form reclining on a couch, however, and Sherwood reached it first. It was Hester, and his first horrified thought was they were too late; but when he had removed the gag that was cruelly torturing her mouth and cut the cords that bound her to the couch, she was able to assure both him and her aunt that she was not seriously hurt. Walking was difficult, owing to the cramped position she had been in for hours, but Sherwood overcame that difficulty by carrying her home in his arms. There he left her to the ministrations of her aunt and Betty, who hovered over her with tears, laughter and copious drafts of hot broth.

Promising to return when she could talk with him, Sherwood sought Peters, who was excitedly waiting an explanation. Betty, in one of her expeditions to the kitchen, had told him that the voice had really found Hester. To his expressed doubt, Sherwood gravely told him it was quite true. They would have to wait until she could talk for further detail concerning her capture.

Curiosity carried them to the house across the way. On the way to the upper rooms, Sherwood stumbled over something. Looking down, he was horrified to see Armstrong prostrate at his feet.

"What's the matter? You're sick!" he cried. "Here, help me put him on a couch, Peters, and run for a doctor quick as you can."

"No use, Sherwood, I'm done for. The cobra did it. Don't waste any sympathy; I turned it loose, intending to get you or the girl when you carried her out of the house. It turned on me. I got it, though; it's over in the corner there, dead. I'm a coward naturally, or I would have put it in the room with her night before last, when I brought her here. I wasn't sure I had covered all my tracks."

"You brought her here night before last," Peters interrupted excitedly, "and I met you at your wife's home yesterday morning."

"And I strung you with a nice domestic lie," he laughed reminiscently.

"Then you and Armstrong and the old woman are one and the same?"

"Yes; I always was fond of theatricals. It was the Caruthers money I was after, and the girl was the only obstacle. But hers was a charmed life, thanks to the voice of the valley. You might tell her that twice I was on the point of putting the cobra in with her, when I had her completely in my power; but something put a fear into me that stopped me. Oh, yes; I'm a goner," he laughed harshly. "I'm gone!" he gasped, and was silent.

When Sherwood returned to the house on The Ridge, Hester had fallen into a deep, refreshing sleep. It was noon when she awakened seemingly none the worse for her experience. The doctor had called to express her delight and prescribe for a patient that laughed at her medicine. Later in the day Doctor Rue called Hester to the phone to assure her that the malign star had passed out of her life forever and to congratulate her on a happy event that had happened, or would happen during the day. Hester smiled consciously at the ring sparkling on her finger. Sherwood had put it there not an hour before.

THE BLUE CURSE

By LINDEN ST. CYR

ON this particular night the Seine looked strangely fascinating, and John Barrett, noticing the fantastic mottling of the dark waters by the quay lamps, ordered his chauffeur to drive more slowly.

A rather sensational sight awaited him. When his car reached the Pont d'Alma, he suddenly saw a woman spring upon the parapet and leap into the river below. Excitedly calling to the driver to stop, he sprang out and ran down the long flight of steps leading from the street to the river-bank. A moment later, as he peered over the black water, he saw a form swimming toward him.

It was late, and few people were about; but as fate would have it, a gendarme, who had heard the splash, came running up just as Barrett was assisting the woman to her feet. He looked at them suspiciously, but before he could speak, the well-dressed young man had pressed a louis into his hand, saying smilingly:

"Just a little accident, my good fellow; don't worry. I'll take care of the lady."

With which the officer was content to show his teeth, tip his cap and promptly disappear in the darkness.

Picking up the exhausted woman, Barrett carried her up to the street and placed her in his limousine.

Picking up the exhausted woman, Barrett carried her up to the street.

"Up the Boulevard St. Germain, very slowly," he directed the driver.

Then he lay the dark, drenched head more comfortably against the cushions and proceeded to chafe the wet little hands vigorously. But the lady was not unconscious; her eyes were half open and he fancied he saw a faint smile playing on the exquisitely curved lips.

"You're not dead, then, mademoiselle?" he queried foolishly.

"Scarcely, monsieur; thanks to you."

"Thanks to your own good swimming, you mean," he laughed. "But you must feel horribly—h'm—wet and uncomfortable. I wish I could do something to——"

"You can, monsieur. Kindly drive me to Boulevard Haussmann 14 *bis*." She sighed and closed her eyes.

Barrett gave the order to the chauffeur, then turned and studied her discreetly. She was a superbly beautiful creature, both in face and form. Her long toga-like garment clung closely to her limbs, almost with the half-sentient tenacity of bathing stockings, revealing matchless contours that would have ravished a Rodin; her feet—small, pink-tipped, white as lilies—were encased in jeweled sandals; her blue-black hair lay about her pale face in thick, wet coils, imparting to her classically perfect features the cold and soul-maddening austerity of a Botticelli Madonna. Who was she? Why had she leaped into the muddy, turgid Seine, that stream of sinister horrors, of hideous murders, despairing suicides? Was she mad? Barrett gave a start at the thought; but the next moment he put the grisly idea from him and gave himself over to the thrilled contemplation of her uncommon beauty. No Lothario was John Barrett; a rather sober, serious-minded fellow he was indeed, in spite of his good looks, youth and well-filled purse; but he was not insensible to feminine charm and loveliness, and here, he had to confess to himself, was a veritable Hebe!

"Not a Parisian, though her French is perfect," he thought; "neither is she Italian or Spanish. A South American — a Chilean, I'll wager my hope of heaven! That's where the Madonnas come from." With a sudden start he saw that she had opened her eyes and was gazing at him quizzically, half-amusedly. He dared ask a rather bold question:

"Mademoiselle finds Paris a good substitute for her own Santiago?"

She flushed, then grew even paler than before. But she still smiled languorously, seductively. "How did monsieur guess?"

"The most beautiful women in the world come from Chile," he replied gallantly. "Too bad Raphael couldn't have flourished three centuries later and painted his Madonnas at Santiago!"

She gave a low, musical laugh. "It's easy to guess your

nationality. You're an American, of course—a New Yorker. It takes a New Yorker to say such charmingly impertinent things. Well, I forgive you, for you have been so kind to me." She flashed a questioning look at him. "You must be thinking I'm mad—yes?" He disclaimed any such manifest absurdity; but she continued quite seriously: "My act was the act of a madwoman, was it not? How else explain it? The Seine is so muddy, so positively repellant, so reeking with gruesome evidences of crime, why, one can hardly dive into those slimy waters without touching a corpse, a floating torso, a dissevered head!" She shuddered violently. "And to think that I, of my own accord, made that dive! Surely you are wondering why I did so."

"Well, yes," he admitted; "but, of course, you have your reasons. Maybe you're such an ardent swimmer that you can't resist even the somewhat questionable lure of the Seine." He smiled indulgently. "Perhaps you feel, under water, some *outre* sensation, something wildly unlike anything terra firma has to offer?"

He broke off abruptly, rather ashamed of such fatuous chatter; but she caught at it with feverish eagerness.

"You're right!" she cried. "How wonderful that I've at last found some one who can understand! This is a hopelessly stupid world, is it not? But you, my friend, seem to have eyes that peer beneath the surfaces and semblances; you have penetrated to what Kant calls the 'thing in itself.' That is really miraculous for a young New Yorker." She laughed a bit disdainfully; but the next moment her lovely face took on its accustomed melancholy gravity. "It may be very foolish; but I do find it inexpressibly fascinating to dive into the ugly, slimy Seine. Its water whispered strange secrets to me—secrets of fair young girls, who have killed themselves for unrequited love; of ambitious men, who have preferred death to hopes dashed and dreams unrealized."

"Ah, I see!" exclaimed Barrett with latent mirth. "You're a modern realistic novelist, and you go under water for 'copy'—atmosphere."

But she did not take his raillery in the way he had expected. Great tears welled from her glorious eyes; her lips moved mutely, piteously; she caught her breath and then suddenly turned away from him toward the brilliant lights of the boulevard.

"I beg your pardon," he murmured contritely. "I assure you I did not mean——"

Without looking at him, she gave his hand a fugitive pressure with her cold fingers. "You are good and kind," she half-whispered, "and I thank you from my heart. I—I am very unhappy; but I cannot—dare not—tell you why. I wish I could. Ah, what a grateful relief it would be to speak out! But I must be silent—silent as the sullenly secretive waters of the Seine. Meanwhile, my friend, think of me as kindly as possible; but don't. I beg, ask me any more questions." With that, she settled into her corner and closed her eyes.

Barrett was a gentleman; he respected her wishes. For a while he sat motionless, gazing out at the nocturnal life of the Boulevard St. Germain, his mind busy in trying to fathom the mystery of the beautiful Chilean he had met under such romantic circumstances. She was beyond doubt a lady; her attire—what there was of it—was rich; she lived on a fashionable thoroughfare; yet she was diving into the filthy waters of the Seine like the gamin of the streets. Unable to resist the spell of her beauty, he turned toward her again and found her shivering in her drenched garments. He took off his light overcoat and wrapped it around her, tucking her into the folds as if he had been putting her to bed. She smiled up at him gratefully.

"Too bad you can't sluff off all this wetness," he laughed boyishly, his cheeks flushed, his eyes glowing. "You must feel quite like a drowned kitten." What a maddening temptation it was to warm that exquisite shivering body in his own eager hot arms!

In a little while they had turned into the Boulevard Haussmann and stopped at 14 *bis*—the regulation high-class Paris apartment-house. John Barrett saw his Lady of the Seine, as he had already begun to call her, into the white-and-gold foyer, where she held out her hand to bid him good-night.

"My name is Quetera," she said simply, "Dolores Quetera, and I am from Santiago, as you so cleverly guessed. And you?"

"I am John Barrett, from New York, as you guessed." She smiled. "Here is your coat."

"Keep it on," he interposed eagerly. "You might catch cold going up in the lift! I'll call for it to-morrow night—may I?"

His ardent blue eyes were irresistible. She nodded, laughed softly, then left him to his surmise.

The next evening John Barrett, handsome and vigorously American in his semi-formal Tuxedo, presented himself at Boulevard Haussman 14 *bis* exactly at nine. The ravishingly mysterious Dolores Quetera received him in a small drawing-room, luxuriously furnished and lighted dimly by a red-globed censer suspended from the frescoed ceiling. She was dressed in an oriental costume of clinging silk, a marvelous one-piece creation that set off the surpassing lines of her figure to singular advantage. Her long, black hair was flowing free and unconfined, and reminded him, oddly enough, of a purplish waterfall he had seen that day on a post-impressionistic canvas at the Luxembourg. The next moment he gave a noticeable start.

"What is it?" she murmured, her fingers still lingering in his.

"That purple waterfall!" he exclaimed, gazing at her steadfastly.

"Why, what do you mean?" she queried.

He was strangely excited. "I saw a picture to-day at the Luxembourg of a radiantly beautiful woman, half-nymph, half-Madonna, standing in front of a wonderful iridescent cascade—and you, Mademoiselle Quetera, posed for the artist!"

Swept by sudden agitation, she trembled and sank upon the silken divan. "Did you notice the artist's name?" she murmured in choked tones.

"No."

"If you had looked closely, Mr. Barrett, you would have seen Ramon Quetera in the corner of the canvas."

"Quetera!" he cried. "Your husband?"

"My brother. He died just after he finished the picture."

"What! How tragical!"

"It was more tragical than you think. He——" But she ceased speaking abruptly and arose. "Come, we'll talk more cheerful things. Shall we go to that window-seat? Walls are insufferable; they stifle me. I have to be where I can look out." She led the way, and in a moment they were pillowed by the window, gazing out idly at the motor-cars and cabs speeding by. Barrett, who had been rehearsing a hundred charming things to say to her, was dully silent. He felt undeniably stupid; he could think of no conversational topics, save the most trite ones—the weather, the war, books, pictures—so he decided not to talk at all. Mademoiselle Quetera, on her side, seemed fairly steeped in absent-mindedness. She looked out on the boulevard with unseeing eyes, and her rather pale face was as expressionless as a Cabanel portrait. At length, seemingly giving in to a sudden impulse, she sprang to her feet.

"Mr. Barrett will excuse me? I'll be back shortly." And with an odd little laugh she hurried from the room.

Barrett—surprised, vaguely anxious—waited ten minutes. Then she returned, clad in the toga she had worn the night before. Her chiseled feet were sandaled; she wore a coquettish bathing-cap on her magnificent hair, and what was most significant of all, she carried a curious little oil silk bag in one hand and a large pair of shears in the other.

Barrett leaped up. "What!" he cried. "Again?"

"Yes, *mon ami*. You will go with me?"

"But this is madness." He looked at the oil silk bag and the shears suspiciously. "Why are you taking those with you?" he asked bluntly. "What are you going to try to find at the bottom of the Seine?"

"Come and find out," she challenged him coolly.

A moment more and they had entered Barrett's waiting limousine and were speeding toward the Pont d'Alma. As Dolores hurried down the steps that led to the banks of the Seine he begged her to forego her absurd intention. Her only answer was a light laugh as she plunged into the darkly sinister waters.

Barrett waited in a fever of suspense. She was under an unconscionable time, it seemed to him, then came up to the surface some distance down-stream. She swam around with apparent aimlessness for a few moments, then disappeared again. Barrett, alarmed, ran along the bank to the point where he had last seen her. She reappeared still farther down-stream.

This odd performance was repeated several times, and he became convinced she was searching something at the bottom of the river. He said as much when at last, drenched and dripping, she climbed upon the bank with his help and then started toward the bridge.

"Certainly," she admitted quietly; "otherwise all this would be sheer lunacy."

"Why not let the police drag the river?"

She gave a shrug. "The police might find too much."

With that rather sinister answer she ran lightly up the long flight of stairs. He followed and then assisted her into the limousine. She was shivering pitiably.

"This will be the death of you!" he exclaimed almost angrily. "How unspeakably silly it all is. You ought to change these dripping garments instantly."

She broke in with a gay laugh. "What, *mon ami*, here in your car?"

"I'll give you my coat and shirt and all the rest I have on!" he cried recklessly. "I'll sit in front with the chauffeur, and you——"

He seized the wet little hands, dried them with his handkerchief, then warmed them against his breast. "Oh, if I were only your brother or sweetheart or father or even husband—anything to speak with authority and make you stop doing this downright dangerous thing. What if the gendarmes see you? You will be arrested as a would-be suicide. Dolores, think!" In his agitation he quite unconsciously lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them.

"Please order your chauffeur to drive to the Boulevard Haussman at once," she said quietly.

"You're not angry?" he implored.

She sighed heavily. "No; only dreadfully discouraged and tired."

The chauffeur made a quick run to the Boulevard Haussmann, and in less than half an hour Dolores had had her bath. Then, radiant in old gold charmeuse, she rejoined Barrett in the little drawing-room. They had a dainty collation served by a statuesque copper-faced Indian girl, a native of Southern Chile, whom Dolores had imported all the way from Santiago, and then Dolores herself made a delicious punch, an exotic nectar which seemed to have some of the golden quality of her own South American sunshine. Barrett drank freely. It coursed in his blood, flushed his cheek, flashed from his eyes, and soon, naturally enough, he was telling her in the most fervid language that he loved her—her alone.

"I've been everywhere!" he cried. "I've seen the most bautiful women of London, Paris, Vienna, my own New York; but you, my Southern passion-flower, my Chilean Madonna, are unique. Marry me, my darling, and give up your mad diving into the sullen Seine."

But Dolores only laughed and told him he was a silly, precipitate boy, reminding him that they were practically strangers. He defended himself on the hackneyed grounds of love at first sight; but she would have none of it, gaily dismissing him, despite his passionate importunities, and promising to write him at his hotel on the morrow, telling him when he might call again.

By nightfall the next day he had received no word from her. Half frantic, he started for the Boulevard Haussmann; then on second thought decided to do a bit of detective work instead. He went to the Pont d'Alma, and, taking up his position in deep shadow, prepared to wait and see what happened.

The night was misty and rainy—a typical Parisian one in late autumn. At nine o'clock Dolores Quetera drove up in a taxicab, sprang out, then, glancing around furtively, ran down the flight of stairs. Barrett followed noiselessly. "She may not come up this time," he told himself grimly. "I may have to jump in to save her life!" And he tore off his coat to be in readiness.

But Dolores ran along the bank at least a hundred yards. Then she made a graceful dive and disappeared under the murky water. She swam down-stream quite a distance, appearing and disappearing at intervals, then climbed upon the bank, hurried back to the steps, ascended them and drove away. Meanwhile, Barrett had waited near the stairs. He felt a great temptation to speak to her, but pride held him back. As her cab bowled down the boulevard, another taxi dashed out of the shadow cast by the Pont d'Alma and sped away in the same direction. A dark-faced, shining-eyed man, evidently a Hindu, thrust out his head, looked at the cab in front and smiled dazzlingly. Was he following Dolores? Barrett, a prey to misgiving, wondered.

At last he decided on a bold course of action. Early the next morning he hired a boatman and, with the aid of grappling hooks tied to the ends of long ropes, they dragged the river in the immediate vicinity of the bridge. Only débris was brought up.

"Row farther down-stream," ordered Barrett.

The boatman plied his oars and they continued the grim search for an hour or more; then, about three hundred yards from the Pont d'Alma, Barrett suddenly felt the ropes tighten. With the help of the boatman, he hauled his booty up to within a few feet of the surface. The water was so muddy he could not see what it was; but it felt sickingly heavy. "Row back to the bridge," he directed.

"What is it, monsieur?" queried the man curiously. "A corpse? The murderous Seine is full of them."

They reached the arched landing-place under the bridge. Barrett sprang out on the mossy flagstones; then, taking the rope, drew from the secretive water the corpse of a man. Barrett's first feeling of horror was swallowed up in wonder at the marvelous preservation of the body. The man must have been in the river for some time, yet only a slight discoloration of the face and a moderate swelling of the limbs were noticeable. His clothes were intact and of good quality. He was young, dark, handsome, evidently a Latin. What was this? Barrett gave a low cry

as he noted his marvelous resemblance to Dolores Quetera. Her brother!

Bending down, Barrett hurriedly searched the man's clothes for some mark of identification. In the inner waistcoat-pocket he found a large oil silk bag pinned to the lining. Now was solved the mystery of why Dolores always brought the shears on her diving expeditions. With trembling fingers Barrett opened the bag and discovered a magnificent diamond of enormous size, wrapped in black velvet. It was at least eight carats in weight and its peculiar bluish color must have enhanced its value threefold. Barrett was no mean judge of precious stones, and he knew at a glance this one was worth a fortune. He put it in his pocket.

"What is monsieur going to do with the corpse?" queried the boatman. "If the gendarmes see us it might be awkward for monsieur. Here in the boat is a piece of tarpaulin. I suggest that we cover the body; curious eyes sometimes make trouble."

They placed the dead man in the boat and covered him with tarpaulin. Then Barrett directed the boatman to wait in midstream until his return.

It was still too early to call on Dolores, so Barrett went to his hotel and had breakfast. At ten o'clock he drove to the Boulevard Haussmann. The beautiful Chilean received him after some delay. She looked unusually pale and her manner was markedly constrained. The door leading to the dining-room was ajar and Barrett noticed her glancing toward it with furtive anxiety.

"Any one in there?" he inquired bluntly.

She flushed. "Certainly not."

Without further parley he took the diamond from his pocket. "Dolores, I found this on the body of your brother."

He got no farther. With a wild cry she sank in a swoon at his feet. Stunned by the suddenness of it, he had not had his wits about him sufficiently to put out his arms to avert her fall.

He dropped to his knees beside her. "Dolores!" he cried.

He was facing the dining-room door. Suddenly a man rushed into the drawing-room—the dark, shining-eyed Hindu he had seen in the mysterious taxi. Barrett instantly recognized him. Instinctively he reached for the diamond, which he had placed beside him on the floor and then made a desperate attempt to spring to his feet. But the Hindu was already upon him. With a snarling cry, he hit Barrett a terrific blow on the head with a slug, and the young American sank unconscious beside Dolores.

When he opened his eyes, she was bending over him and bandaging his head. An infinite tenderness rested on her face, making her doubly beautiful.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she cried brokenly. "You did it all for me. What devotion, and I was so ungrateful! But only seemingly so, I assure you! The poor head! Is the pain quite unbearable?"

He smiled up at her. "It might be a lot worse." Then suddenly, "Where is the diamond?"

"The Hindu took it. Thank God he has it at last!"

The sincere fervor of her tones was not to be mistaken. Barrett regarded her with astonishment. She laughed gaily.

"Come," she said, "I'll tell you all about it. But first I'll pillow the poor head on my lap—may I?"

"Dolores!" He seized the fugitive fingers that had been half unconsciously stroking his hair and kissed them hungrily.

She pillowed his head comfortably (oh happy Barrett!), then began:

"The diamond you found on my poor Ramon was 'The Blue Curse.' That's what the priests of the temple called it, and what a curse it proved to be! It caused the death of my brother and almost drove me mad." She shuddered, then composed herself. "Ramon and I were traveling in India. At a little town not far from Calcutta we saw The Blue Curse in the eye of a huge, hideous god. We did not tarry before it very long, as the stone seemed to cast a malevolent spell upon us both. Imagine our astonishment then, several days later, when, upon embarking for Havre, we found the diamond in the large pocket of a raincoat Ramon had had across his arm while in the temple. Who had put it there?

"Ramon, who was naturally nervous and temperamental, worried himself sick; he feared the jewel would carry the curse its name implied. On arriving at Havre the mystery was solved. An unsigned letter, written in perfect English, was awaiting us. It stated that a Thibetan, who had been hidden behind the god while we were in the temple, had stolen the stone from the eye-socket just after we had turned away from viewing it. The priest in charge, who had disappeared for a few minutes, at that moment returned, and the Thibetan, fearing discovery, dropped the diamond in the pocket of Ramon's raincoat. The letter went on to say the priests of the temple realized we were not thieves, but declared they'd hold us responsible for the safe-keeping of The Blue Curse. A Hindu priest named Ben-Sakya had already started after us to recover the stone.

"The Blue Curse was a curse indeed. It literally drove my poor brother insane. He had a wild fear of losing it, so wore it pinned to the inside of his waistcoat. At length, after an attempted hold-up by footpads, who, however, did not secure the diamond, he declared his intention of killing himself to escape the maddening strain. I did not dream he meant it. He leaped into the Seine and forgot to leave the diamond behind! Alas, that showed how far gone his mind really was.

"Well, you know the rest. The Hindu Ben-Sakya came. He cruelly insisted my life would pay the forfeit unless I produced The Blue Curse. So, half-mad myself, I began my desperate search for Ramon's body. Only this morning the Hindu declared I must find the diamond this very day, under pain of death. Oh, *mon ami*, what do I not owe you?"

"Dolores!" he whispered, gently lowering her face to his and imprinting a passionate kiss on the perfect lips.

They buried poor Ramon in Pere La Chaise, and then Barrett took Dolores away to forget.

HOUSE OF SEVEN GABLES NOW A SOUP KITCHEN

THE House of Seven Gables, made famous by Nathaniel Hawthorne, has renewed its youth and blossomed forth as a soup kitchen, from which is dispensed meat soup at 12 cents a quart.

Two huge wash boilers repose on a large gas stove that has been set up in front of the cavernous fireplace which in the early days of the State glowed with cordiality and comfort.

It is at present the headquarters of the liberty soup kitchens.

THE OXYGEN BIT

By ROBERT D. BRAINE

ON a sultry June evening, Francis De Novis, one of the Four Hundred of New York City, stood before a mirror in the gorgeously appointed bathroom of his residence on Fifth avenue, with a look of horror and desperation in his eyes, and with the muzzle of a revolver pressed to his temple. He stood before a mirror the better to direct his aim. A half-emptied flask of brandy stood on the edge of the bath-tub. The blinds were tightly drawn, and every gas-jet in the bathroom and in the bedroom into which it opened, was lighted and turned on as high as it would go, showing that the desperate occupant dreaded the darkness as a hint of the dark journey, on the threshold of which his soul was trembling.

Two telegrams lay on the floor near the center-table. The first ran as follows:

"AUVIGNE, N. J., June 8th.

"Gold Bug made it in 1.39 on a wet track. The game is up. (Signed) HICKS."

The second telegram was from a downtown stock broker, and read:

"NEW YORK CITY, June 8th.

"Whitewater Preferred closed 33 3-8. Receivership for the property rumored. Sands sold 10,000 on the day down from 39, and Perkins 15,000. The bear crowd threaten to gut the stock to-morrow. Must have $50,000 more margin before the opening. DOWD, SMITH & CO."

The telegrams, as well as the envelopes in which they had been placed, were crumpled, as if a despairing hand had suddenly clenched them and then thrown them down.

It was plain that the telegrams had contained the information which had caused Francis De Novis to resolve on self-destruction. What could have brought such a man to this pass?

De Novis' name was a power of strength in every relation of life. Reputed to be immensely wealthy, of an old line colonial family, happily married, a patron of the arts, owner of a box at the Metropolitan, he seemed to be on the highest crest of the wave of fashion and success. He reveled in all the patrician sports of the wealthy. He owned a stud of fleet trotters who had won many a race; he owned a yacht, which had broken the record at the last meeting of the club; he shot in the season, he fished in the season, and his life seemed a paradise to less fortunate friends. His business operations were of singular brilliance. He appeared in Wall Street but few times in the course of a year, but when he did, it was to conduct a speculative deal which seemed to be so well planned and so well timed that it was invariably successful and enormously profitable.

He bought at the bottom and sold at the top, while his friends bought at the top and sold at the bottom. He put in practice Baron Rothschild's favorite advice to "buy 'em sheep and sell 'em deer." The result was that he made *coup* after *coup*, each one being attended with immense profit. His friends swore that he had a lucky star like Napoleon's.

But of late this star had been obscured; everything had gone wrong. He had been one of a great syndicate which had purchased a vast mining property in Mexico, only to find that the title was not worth a sou. A Western manufacturing concern in which he had just invested $200,000 had been ruined by a speculating manager, and now came this "Whitewater Preferred" deal, in which he had hoped to recoup all his losses. He had had what he considered a sure tip from the highest sources that there was to be a big advance, and a bull campaign in it on account of an immensely profitable traffic arrangement which was about to be made between it and the Great Southern. Acting on this tip, De Novis began to buy the stock in immense quantities. To his great surprise, he got all he wanted, without running the market up on himself.

At last he became suspicious and stopped buying. From that moment the stock began to fall. In vain he circulated "bull tips" about the stock through the Exchange, in which the proposed traffic agreement was worked for all it was worth. In vain he tried to bolster up the stock. For the first time in his life he found a great "deal" going against him, and threatening disaster.

Matters went from bad to worse. The Whitewater system was rumored to be heavily involved, and the bears even got out a story that a receivership was inevitable. There was a panic in the stock and De Novis' brokers surrounded him like wolves, clamoring for more margins. Still the stock fell, and still the market licked up his margins like some vast quicksand. At last the end of his pile had been reached and he saw ruin staring him in the face, unless he could put up more margins.

"Don't sell," said all his brokers, "hold on; Whitewater's all right. This is a conspiracy to ruin you. Old Hawkins and 'Flatboat' Peterson, that you did up in that Oregon Central deal to the tune of $200,000 last February, are engineering it to try and get 'revenge.' If you hold on you'll beat 'em."

De Novis believed in his very soul that they were right, and left no recourse untried to put up more margins.

Still Whitewater Preferred fell. Then an evil spirit whispered: "Your niece has $200,000 in Chicago and Northwestern bonds in a box in the Central Safe Deposit Co. You are her guardian and have charge of her fortune. Borrow them, put them up as collateral. You can borrow enough on them to tide you over until Whitewater has struck bottom. Then when it goes up, you can replace them, and who will be the wiser?"

De Novis knew how dangerous a principle it is to even think of using trust funds, much less actually touching them, but still he could not silence the tempter. Ruin would come anyhow, and this course would give him a chance to regain all he had lost.

It was the old story of the stranded speculator. With the best intentions in the world, and feeling sure he could replace the funds, he took the bonds and realized the sum of $150,000. Then he whirled this money into the maelstrom of speculation in Whitewater Preferred. It stayed the downward flood for a day, but only for a day, for the following morning witnessed a fiercer onslaught than ever on it.

With a sick feeling at heart and a terrible sense of impending ruin, De Novis watched the sinking quotations, and knew that, unless the tide turned soon, he would be a criminal as well as a bankrupt. One chance alone remained to him—his wonderful mare, Firefly. The day

following the Suburban Derby was to be run for a purse of $70,000, and the mare was entered for the race. De Novis had felt tolerably certain of the race—had almost counted the purse as part of his assets, in fact—until a day or so back, when rumors reached him that Gold Bug, a noted California horse, which was also entered for the race, and which was in training at Auvigne, N. J., was developing wonderful speed—speed which would inevitably win the race, especially as Firefly had shown unmistakable signs of failing in the last few weeks.

De Novis had sent Joe Hicks, a detective, who made turf matters a specialty, to Auvigne as soon as the reports had reached him, to investigate matters. Hicks' telegram, which lay on the floor, caused his worst fears to be realized. It was plain that Gold Bug was several seconds faster than Firefly.

De Novis had been too nervous and ill to venture on the floor of the Exchange the entire day, and when the telegram from Hicks came on top of the sickening news from his brokers, De Novis was thrown into a state of desperation, which after hours of torture caused him to resolve on solving his difficulties with a pistol ball.

Twice his hand pressed the trigger, and twice he paused. In the room below he could hear the innocent prattle of his little children, Marguerite and Paul, and the sweet voice of his young wife singing a ballad, and accompanying herself on the harp. His brain was lighted up with a vivid picture of the scene which would follow his act. It was maddening.

Again he pressed the revolver to his temple and his finger twitched nervously on the trigger, but he could not pull it.. He slowly lowered the weapon, and as he did so his eye caught sight of a newspaper on the bathroom floor. A headline attracted him. It read: "Suicide on the East Side. Another Unfortunate Rocked to his Last Sleep in the Arms of Morphine."

He caught up the paper and devoured the article which told of a wretched toiler on the East Side, who had tired of an uphill struggle with poverty and ill health. One night he had drunk some morphine at bed-time, and when morning had come the world had lost the power to torture him longer.

"That would be better," sighed De Novis. "I cannot do it with this," and he pushed the revolver away with horror. "Then who knows? Maybe some unlooked-for chance may save me yet. If it must be done, though, I would rather sleep my life away."

Then the miserable man resolved to slip out and get some morphine, so as to be prepared for the worst. He bathed his eyes and forehead, drank another deep draught from the flask, which in his overwrought condition affected him as little as so much Appolinaris would have done, and went softly downstairs.

"Come home soon, Francis," said his wife from the drawing-room, as her quick ear caught the sound of his hand on the door handle.

"Yes, dear," said the miserable husband, in as steady a voice as he could command.

A strong impulse seized him to rush into the room and confess everything to his wife, and implore her forgiveness and help, but he mastered it with a violent effort and passed out into the night.

An approaching storm was growling and muttering in the west. The wind was blowing the clouds rapidly across the moon, which was at the full.

De Novis paused in front of several drug stores, and was about to enter and ask for a dollar's worth of morphine, when he suddenly remembered that no reputable druggist would sell it without a prescription. Nothing was better known to him than this fact, and nothing better expresses his wild condition than that he had forgotten it.

As he stood on a street corner, irresolute, suddenly he remembered a little chemist's shop down a side street, a few blocks distant from his home.

It was kept by a visionary sort of man, who had been a college mate of De Novis at Yale, and who had taken a scientific course. His name was Melanchthon Euclid Jones, but he was universally known as "Oxygen Jones" around the college, because of his predilection for experimenting with that gas, and of the articles he used to write for the college paper, predicting that oxygen would be found to be the true philosopher's stone and the real elixir of life. De Novis had never been intimate with "Oxygen Jones" at college, and when the latter had set up a small chemist's shop near his home, after graduation, he had never claimed acquaintance with nor even spoken to its proprietor, when he occasionally met him at rare intervals on a walk in the vicinity.

Now he thought he saw a way of making his slight acquaintance with the man useful. He hoped to be able to persuade him to sell a small quantity of the coveted morphine on some pretext or other.

After a short walk he found the place without difficulty. His spirits fell when he observed that it seemed to be closed up. This was only apparent on the outside, however, as De Novis found, as he flattened his face against the glass and looked in, that a bright light shone through the transom over the door which led into the back room. The front room was lighted by a small lamp in a bracket.

De Novis turned the handle of the door and tried to enter. The door was either locked or stuck fast. After several trials it proved to be the latter, for by putting his knee to it and pressing harder it yielded. This was the first time De Novis had ever found himself in his former classmate's shop, and he looked around rather curiously. The place was fitted up with shelves, most of which were taken up with bottles of chemicals like an ordinary drug-store. Some of the shelves were filled with retorts, alembics, etc., and others again with stuffed birds and reptiles preserved in alcohol. A grinning alligator, which looked singularly life-like in the uncertain light, a skeleton, several skulls and two mounted bats made the place look remarkably like the den of an alchemist of the middle ages.

As he stood irresolute in the middle of the place wondering how he should summon the proprietor, he heard voices in the next room. One of the voices was loud and pitched in a high key, as if its owner was holding a conversation with a deaf companion. The other, seemingly that of the deaf man, was so low and gruff as to be almost inaudible.

"It's the very agent for your purpose," the high voice was saying; "either give him that or blow his brains out."

The gruff voice seemed to demur at this, and De Novis' blood ran cold, for he wondered whether he had stumbled onto a murder plot.

"I gave some to a rabbit the other day," said the loud voice, "and it worked him up in great shape, I tell you. It would be the same thing with old Jay B. You could administer it just when it was necessary, and no one could imagine what you had 'fixed' him with."

"Can you do it?" the gruff voice asked.

"Yes, I can make you a full apparatus for fixing him."

By this time De Novis, what with the grewsome objects in the front room, the snakes, the skeletons and the bats, and the enigmatical conversation in the back room, was feeling decidedly unhinged. He thought the best thing, under the circumstances, was to make his presence known, and then the conspirators would know or suspect, at least,

that they had been overheard. He coughed several times and shuffled his feet. This failing to make his presence known, he went to the back door and rapped.

The conversation stopped instantly, and in a moment the door opened, and the chemist appeared shading his eyes with his hand. At first he failed to recognize De Novis.

"What are you doing there?" he said, somewhat roughly; "don't you know you have no business in my front room when the lights are out and after my closing hours?"

"I beg your pardon," said De Novis, "I dropped in to get something, and finding the door open, walked in." There was something about the voice which the chemist seemed to recognize. He went back in the room and brought out a lamp.

"Oh, it's you, is it, De Novis?" he said. "Well, what do you want?"

"I am afraid I interrupted your conversation," said De Novis, watching the chemist's face rather narrowly as he spoke.

The face did not change expression. "Yes," said he, "I was on my old hobby; I was just advising one of my customers to try the oxygen treatment on old Jay B., one of his trotters which seems to be suffering with slow circulation."

"Good heavens!" said De Novis, "I thought you were planning a murder."

The chemist broke into a hearty laugh. "No," said he, "far different. That goes to show the value of circumstantial evidence, however; a man named James Brown disappears the next day. You remember the conversation you heard about Jay B. We would be arrested. Lots of other 'proofs' would be found against us and we would go to the electric chair."

It has often been noticed that a man on his way to the scaffold will show curiosity about things around him. De Novis could not help feeling curious about what he had heard about applying oxygen treatment to horses, and he said so to the chemist.

"Well, if you are interested about the matter," said the latter, "and have a few minutes to spare, I don't mind explaining something of my invention to you. Maybe I can take your order for an 'oxygen bit.' Come in the back room; Jackson was just going anyhow. You couldn't induce him to try anything new with a club in one hand and a Gatling-gun in the other."

When they were comfortably seated, "Oxygen" Jones took out a short pipe and commenced smoking.

"It is a short story and soon told," said he. "You remember that the boys at the college always called me 'Oxygen' by way of nickname. Well, it was deserved, for I did little else than study that gas and its properties when at college. You know that oxygen comprises one-fifth of the air. Increase the supply, and you would stimulate all animal life to an incredible degree. Pure oxygen would cause the animal kingdom to run riot. Ours would be a short life and a merry one. Do you remember when the professor put a mouse in a jar filled with pure oxygen at college one day? The little creature's heart beat like a humming-bird's wings. It raced around the jar like a wild animal, and finally died from too much stimulation.

"One day I attended a horserace near the college. One of the horses, a pretty good beast ordinarily, a jockey told me, wouldn't start at all. The jockey said he suffered from slow 'circulation,' and wondered whether a brandy cocktail wouldn't brace him up. It struck me that maybe an oxygen cocktail might prove more efficacious. From that time I spent much of my leisure in studying and testing the effects of oxygen on animal life, and I am afraid to say how many helpless rabbits, frogs, mice, etc., I have butchered in cold blood. I made many marvelous discoveries, and found that by administering oxygen in varying quantities, I could produce wonderful effects on the heart and nervous system.

"My next step was the construction of my first 'oxygen bit' for horses. The bit was hollow, and had rows of holes through which the pure oxygen could be forced from small flexible tubes concealed in the reins, and connected with a retort of the gas in the saddle arranged so that the weight of the rider would force it through the tubes when certain valves were opened. It was a proud moment when I finished my first saddle and bit, although they were naturally clumsy and misshapen. I never shall forget the day when I tried the invention. I hired a sleepy old cart horse from an Irish laborer, and saddled him up with my saddle and bit. Then I jogged him out into the country to try the bit. As soon as I found a clear stretch of road where there were no observers, I opened the valves and let him have a whiff of the gas. The effect was marvelous. He commenced to sniff the air and paw the ground like a war horse, and the next minute he broke into a run which would have carried him a mile in 2.50 or less. As he ordinarily protested against anything faster than a hearse-like walk, and his owner said he sometimes had to build a fire under him to start him at all, I naturally left highly elated over the success of my 'oxygen bit.' Again and again I tried it, and every time the cart horse responded and shot out his rheumatic old legs like a four-year-old."

"And what have you done with your invention since?" said De Novis, who had followed the recital with breathless interest.

"Well, nothing to speak of," said Jones; "I had great notions that some time my invention might make me a kind of a 'King of the Turf,' but 'sporting' has never been much in my line, and I never did much with my idea."

"Have you shown your invention to any horseman here in New York?" said De Novis, a sudden light gleaming in his eye.

"Not one," said Jones, "at least nobody but old Jackson, who was in here when you came, and who certainly don't count as a horseman."

"Do you really think it would increase the speed of a horse for the time being?"

"There can be no doubt about it. I have proved it myself a hundred times."

"Can you sell me a saddle with a concealed retort and an oxygen bit?"

"Oxygen?" Jones looked up quickly at his visitor to see whether he was in earnest, or had simply taken a bottle of champagne too much at the club and was in a quizzing mood.

De Novis seemed deeply in earnest.

"No, I have nothing that I could sell. I believe I have the old bit and saddle that I used to experiment with in the garret, but they are so uncouth that you would not have them within a mile of your dainty horseflesh. But what did you want them for and when?"

De Novis leaned over and looked his companion earnestly in the face.

"I have my mare Firefly entered for the Suburban Derby. My fortune, my happiness, yes, my life itself, depend on her winning the race. I thought she had a sure thing until a few days ago, when reports have reached me that Gold Bug, a California horse, is likely to prove several seconds faster.

"There may be something in your scheme, and there may not be. At any rate I am desperate and willing to

try the last chance or any chance which might lead to success."

"And the race is——"

"To-morrow."

"Whew, what can be done by to-morrow?"

"That's it," said De Novis, "even now we are losing valuable time. I will give you $500 for your co-operation and $5,000 if I win through your means. Make a new apparatus if you can, or patch up the old one if you must. But whatever is to be done must be done quickly."

"Who is to ride the horse?"

"My jockey is named Stephens."

"A regular jockey would never do. He would not only blab the whole scheme, but would never be able to manage the apparatus."

"What is to be done?"

"Oxygen" Jones' face wore a perplexed expression for some minutes, and then brightened up.

"I have it," said he; "I have a kind of an apprentice, named Henderson, or 'Lanky Jim,' as he is more familiarly known, who looks after the shop and runs errands. He used to help me when I was still experimenting with the 'bit,' and I sometimes used to let him try it on his own hook. He won't cut much of a figure with your slick jockeys at the Oakdale track, but he can stick to a horse like a porous-plaster, and any secret you tell him is as safe as if it was tied to a piece of pig iron and thrown into the Red Sea."

The two men having come to an understanding, De Novis rose to go.

"Oh, by the way," said Jones, "what was it you dropped in to get?"

"Oh, nothing much," was the rather confused reply; "I dropped in to get some—some—oh, yes, some bi-carbonate of soda. I am a good deal troubled with acidity of the stomach, and I am afraid of that drug-store soda."

"Oh, is that it?" said Jones. "I thought that you might have come in for something more serious by the excited look you had in your eyes. You looked exactly as if you had taken a quart of strychnine and had come after an antidote."

"Nothing could have been farther from the truth," said De Novis, changing color.

So it was arranged. Jones proceeded to put in his night earning the best fee he had ever taken, and De Novis went home feeling like a condemned murderer respited for a few hours on a new bit of evidence which might or might not prove of value. He hoped to secure a loan of $50,000 the next morning on his wife's jewels, which would tide him over the day of the race and satisfy his brokers for a breathing spell, and then if the oxygen bit stimulated his little mare into coming in a winner, who knows but all might be well.

As he reached home De Novis staggered like a drunken man as he went up the steps, so great had been the excitement of the day.

It was a brave sight at the Oakdale track. For months nothing had been talked of in fashionable circles, as well as among the turfmen, but the Suburban Derby, not only on account of the vast sum offered as a purse, but also on account of the fame of the horses who were entered. There were six entries in all—Gold Bug, Firefly, Siegfried, Telegraph II., Arctic King and Zulu—but it was generally believed that the contest lay between Firefly and Gold Bug, the California horse.

When De Novis' automobile arrived, a buzz and half-cheer went up from the immense multitude which filled every portion of the immense grandstand and surrounding inclosure. He was clean-shaven and faultlessly dressed, and his pale face and excited eyes alone indicated the intense mental strain within.

He placed $10,000 on his horse with several of the nearest bookmakers, and then hurried off to the stable to look after Firefly.

Oxygen Jones had already arrived, accompanied by "Lanky Jim," and together they were fitting the clumsy saddle, with its concealed retort charged with oxygen, on the trim little mare. De Novis started back with disgust when he saw the clumsy-looking lout who was to ride Firefly, and the hideous-looking saddle which he was to bestride, but it was too late to back out, and he was forced to make the best of it.

A cheer outside on the track announced the appearance of Gold Bug and the other horses. In another minute Firefly appeared, awkwardly ridden by "Lanky Jim." First a buzz of amazement, then of derision, and finally a burst of laughter, which brought the hot blood to De Novis' cheeks, greeted the extraordinary apparition.

The judges craned forward to look at saddle and jockey, and a report at once started that De Novis had become mentally unbalanced.

Many were the jibes of the turfmen.

"A jockey like that would make a mule out of a greyhound," said Sam Dodson, one of the wits of the turf.

"You've said the word," said Joe Dodson, his bother. "A cyclone couldn't make time with a plush rocker like that saddle on it."

People who had money on Firefly had faces a yard long, and the odds against her commenced to mount.

But as there was nothing to prevent a man from putting a bale of cotton on his horse for a saddle, and a plowboy on top of that as well, the bell finally sounded for the start.

In the first heat Firefly justified the opinion of the crowd, for she ran heavily from the start, and was soon hopelessly in the rear. The sweat of agony stood on De Novis' brow. Something was evidently wrong with the oxygen bit, for Lanky Jim was observed to clap his hand to the saddle time and time again, and to frantically shake the reins.

The crowd laughed derisively, and yelled itself hoarse at the expense of Lanky Jim, who they dubbed "the living skeleton."

As expected, Gold Bug won the heat, with Zulu a good second.

When Firefly came in, De Novis flew to her.

"You lunkhead, you idot!" he hissed, and he would have struck "Lanky Jim" if Jones had not stretched forth a restraining hand and asked Jim what the trouble had been.

"Wouldn't work," said "Lanky Jim" laconically; "valve out of order, or suthin'."

Firefly was taken hastily to the stable and quickly rubbed down. When the apparatus was examined, it proved to be as Jim said—one of the valves had "stuck."

"Better luck next heat," said Jones, as he fixed the valve; "you see it is as I told you. This machine's like a wooden locomotive, not made for actual running."

After everything had been repeatedly examined, Lanky Jim mounted and sallied forth for the next heat. By this time the odds against Firefly had gone up at least 50 to 1, so unfavorable an impression had been caused by her clumsy appearance and awkward rider.

"Grin away, you apes!" hissed Jim, as a derisive yell greeted his appearance on the track; "I'll make monkeys of you yet!"

There was quite a delay in getting a start, and one

"Slippy" Sam raised a laugh by stating that the other horses objected to running with such a rocking-horse as Firefly.

At last the start was made, and De Novis watched with his soul in his eyes.

At first the heat showed signs of being a duplicate of the last; Firefly was far in the rear.

But suddenly a miracle seemed to happen. De Novis saw Lanky Jim's hand go to the side of the saddle, where the valve was located. Then the mare commenced sniffing and snorting, and her lithe legs shot out like the spokes of a spinning-wheel. It was a magnificent spurt. Faster and faster she flew as her ungainly jockey plied her faster and faster. Soon she overtook Telegraph II, who was in the rear; then, amidst the wildest excitement and enthusiasm, she shot successfully past the other four. Finally one horse alone stood between her and victory—Gold Bug, the California flyer. Then she seemed to fall off and was soon six feet back. A cold chill crept over De Novis. He was certain that the valve had again failed. Just then his hand bumped against something hard in his coat-pocket. It proved to be his opera-glasses. He quickly took them out of his pocket and scanned Jim's face. It reassured him. Jim's jaws were shut hard and he had a reassuring look of determination.

They were coming down the homestretch magnificently; but De Novis seemed doomed to be disappointed, for Gold Bug was way in the lead. The crowd was yelling frantically, and no one would have given the proverbial "rap" for Firefly's chances. Suddenly, as before, Lanky Jim pressed the valve, and again the effect was instantaneous.

As the mare drew in the gas, a fire seemed to run through her veins and she shot out like a shell from a mortar. Gold Bug's driver saw her coming, and he goaded his horse into an extra effort. It was no use, however. As well might he have tried to race with a cyclone. Down she thundered, passed Gold Bug, and then, amid the frantic yelling of the crowd, passed under the wire a full length ahead of her California rival. De Novis was beside himself with joy and was throwing up his hat like a schoolboy.

But his joy was chilled when he remembered the next heat. Would not the power of the animal to respond to stimulation become exhausted in time? All depended on the next heat, and De Novis' blood was chilled in his veins as he thought of her failing.

"Jim, for God's sake, be careful in this heat," he gasped; "everything I have depends on it."

"Don't get excited, Cap," said the iron-nerved, improvised jockey; "the mare 'll do it, never fear."

De Novis caught sight of his wife and little ones far up in the grandstand, and a thrill went through him as he thought how their fate trembled in the balance, and what an immense influence the result of the next heat would have upon their destiny. All depended on the four feet of his mare and the coolness of Lanky Jim.

The odds had fallen like plummets against Firefly by this time, and several of his friends tried to induce De Novis to take off the bulky-looking saddle and substitute a regulation racing saddle, but he steadily refused.

"Boys," said he, "that's a patent saddle. I promised the inventor to give it a fair trial, and I'm going to do it."

"Well, but try it at a county fair with a four-fifty harrow team, De Novis," said Hendricks, one of De Novis' Stock Exchange friends; "by my soul, it hurts me to see that trim little beast saddled with that bale of cotton and a farmer for a jockey."

De Novis stood firm, however, and soon all was ready for the next heat. Jim took Firefly to the stable and arranged the apparatus with the greatest care. But one-third of the oxygen had been used, and he said he would pump it all through the beast and that he would win.

There was again difficulty in getting a good start, but finally the horses got off.

Firefly seemed rather dazed at first, but a whiff of oxygen put some mettle into her. It was evident, though, that it was to be a close heat.

"Will you back your horse for $1,000, De Novis?" said Hendricks.

"Yes, for $2,000," said De Novis, his voice trembling with excitement, and the two men jotted down the bet in their note-books.

On the horses flew. Soon Firefly began to lag, however, and she finally fell behind. It was evident something was wrong.

"She's ditched!" roared the crowd.

De Novis was frantic. Under the excitement of the moment he was about to mount the fence and rush across the track to his mare.

Then the crowd witnessed something so remarkable that turfmen who had seen it used to tell it as a choice morsel to their associates years afterward.

They saw Firefly's awkward jockey deliberately pull Firefly back on her haunches, slip off on the track, adjust the bit and reins, and spring back on the mare's back and urge her after the retreating crowd of horses with frantic speed.

Only two men in all that vast concourse, besides her rider — De Novis and Oxygen Jones — understood the jockey's action. The balance thought the man had gone raving crazy, or else was a country bumpkin who had never ridden a race before, and a groan went up from a portion of the grandstand.

But before the groan had died out, a cheer commenced, for Firefly was tearing wildly down the homestretch, at a pace such as had never before been witnessed on Oakdale track.

A grizzled veteran of the turf, with his stop-watch in his hand, gasped in astonishment:

"Great Scott, a pace like that kept up a mile would do it in one-twenty!"

"Yes," said the friend; "the mare seems to be hitched to a thunderbolt."

On and on she tore! Now she has reached the rear-guard of the plunging squadron of racers! Now she has passed the fifth! Next the fourth! Now the third! Next the second! Then, amid a frenzy of excitement in the crowd, she passed Gold Bug, the California horse! Next she flies, dripping with sweat, under the wire, and the race is hers!

The general opinion of the crowd is that De Novis is either drunk or crazy. He tumbles over the fence and hugs his pretty mare as if she was his bride and he on his honeymoon. He hugs the mare around the neck; he kisses her foam-flecked nose; he embraces her lithe, shapely legs, and makes a fool of himself generally.

Then he embraces Lanky Jim and Oxygen Jones.

But this is not all. A telegram is thrust in his hand. His hands tremble so that he cannot open it, and a friend does it for him. It reads:

"Shorts driven to cover in Whitewater Pref. Advanced five points the last hour. Closed at 42 3-8. Think will do better to-morrow.

(Signed) "DOWD, SMITH & CO."

He was saved. The blood rushed to his heart, and he fell heavily across the track in a dead faint.

When he opened his eyes a few moments later he found those of his wife looking into his and little Marguerite and Paul standing near by.

THE X-RAY

By FRANCIS WORCESTER DOUGHTY

THE reason Alfred Maudsley followed the girl was because she wore her hair in one thick, golden braid, which hung down below her waist. The whole expression of her face reminded him most forcibly of one he had known and loved; one left behind in New York when the young American tenor accepted an engagement with Tousain't Concert Company and went abroad.

He saw her walking just ahead of him as he strolled along the Bolshaia Ssattovia, Petrograd, shortly before midnight. When the performance at the Grand Duke's Theater was over Maudsley, yielding to an old habit of his, wandered away by himself.

"Heavens! How much she looks like Helen," thought Maudsley; and yet he knew that it could only be a chance resemblance, for he had been but a few days in the Russian capital, and the fair Helen in question had parted from him at the steamer's plank when he left New York.

Just then the girl looked back and smiled; then, gliding into a narrow alley between two booths, which extended out upon the sidewalk, she disappeared. Maudsley stepped on more briskly, and, passing, peered into the alley, standing between a pile of snow-white hares lying in front of the booth on his left and a frozen reindeer stretched upon the snow before the one on the right. The alley was a blind one, ending at a tottering old structure; over the low doorway burned a red lantern, on which was "café" in Russian and French, with the name Michael Slocovich, and the words *Pradadu Pravnuk* (grandson of the grandfather). It was only a marketman's night-house, and, to judge by the sign, which Maudsley of course could not read, evidently an old-established concern.

Under the light stood the girl, the sole figure in the alley. She held up her left hand and made the sign of the cross with the forefinger, then bringing the arm suddenly down at her side with a quick gesture. Having done this, she ran down the steps, passed into the café, and was gone.

He forced the long, sinewy fingers of his right hand into Maudsley's mouth.

"Strange!" murmured Maudsley. "Evidently I am taken for some one else?"

The gesture perplexed him. It could scarcely be an invitation to enter and pay for the vodka. Looking at his watch, he thought of nihilists and plots and other things supposed to be distinctively Russian.

"I'll give ten minutes to this adventure," he resolved, "and that will bring it to midnight. Anyway, it is a public house, and if I keep my mouth shut I can't get into trouble. I'm just curious enough to want to see what her next move will be."

He was anxious to see the inside of one of these market night-houses also, and had intended to enter one and drink a glass of vodka before going to his hotel. The "grandson of the grandfather" now seemed as likely to serve his purpose as any other, so the young tenor passed in under the red lantern and entered a long, low room, crowded to excess with a swarm of noisy, half-drunken marketmen and peasants. The place was so clouded with smoke that Alfred Maudsley could hardly distinguish anything at first glance. Then, as his vision cleared, he saw a double row of little tables against the wall on either side, at most of which men, wrapped in long cowskin coats, their heads covered with thick astrakhan caps, sat drinking and smoking cigarettes. Between the tables at the front was an immense stove, red-hot, around which fully twenty men stood warming themselves. In the rear—he could see it now, his eyes having accustomed themselves to the dim light and smoky atmosphere—were tiers of bunks, reaching from the floor to ceiling. They were mere shelves, on which men lay, sleeping off their vodka, to be wakened long before dawn, when the business of the Bolshaia Ssattovia would begin.

Maudsley dropped into a chair at the nearest table and ordered vodka and cigarettes, for the waiter was instantly at his side. The girl was nowhere to be seen, although there were women in plenty in the place. Lighting a cigarette and leaving the fiery spirit untasted, Maudsley took

his time and looked from face to face with more than an unusual interest.

He was thus engaged when a man strolled toward the table from the rear and sat down opposite him. He smiled and nodded and took out a cigarette. Maudsley returned the nod and offered a light.

The stranger, who was tall, thin and stooping, with a huge nose and thin, sunken cheeks, accepted the courtesy with a polite bow. As he handed Maudsley back his cigarette he leaned across the table and whispered:

"Witopsky!"

Maudsley shook his head. The thin-faced man spoke a few hurried words. It might have been Russian, Greek or Chinese, for all Maudsley knew, so he shook his head again.

"Ah, so you are cautious?" breathed the stranger in fairly good English. "Still, we are perfectly safe, and you must remember that night in Shampansky's, at the corner of Hester and Essex streets in New York."

Maudsley began to grow nervous and to wish he was on the other side of the door, for it was now perfectly evident that this was a case of mistaken identity.

"You take me for somebody else," he said. "I haven't the faintest idea what you mean."

The man's face grew dark. "And yet you responded to the sign," he hissed. "Of what use is this? Here is the paper; you must receive it; you shall."

He drew from his vest-pocket a small pellet of paper not larger than a good-sized pill and extended it across the table.

Maudsley arose. "I don't know you, sir," he said, and started for the door.

The thin man leaped to his feet, and, throwing himself in front of him, barred the way, uttering a few hurried but wholly unintelligible words. At the same instant three men sprang up from a table further down the long room on the opposite side. Maudsley did not see them, but the stranger did. His face turned as white as chalk. With one quick rush he flung himself upon the American, seized him by the throat with his left hand, pulling down the lower jaw and forcing the long, sinewy fingers of his right into Maudsley's mouth.

It was all done as quick as lightning. Maudsley, gagged and choked and striking out, took the stranger full between the eyes. The man crouched down and ran like some animal for the door. Whether he reached it or not, or what became of him, Maudsley never knew, for, all in the same instant, he was surrounded by a crowd, pushing and jabbering, forcing him this way and that.

Suddenly a loud, stern voice rang out above all the others and the crowd fell back. Maudsley thought he saw his chance, and made for the door. No such good fortune as to reach it was in store for him.

Suddenly he was seized from behind and jerked violently around by the collar. The three men who had so alarmed the stranger were upon him. Two seized him by the arms, the third still held on at his neck. Their strength seemed enormous. Maudsley's struggles were utterly vain. Where a babel of tongues had resounded but a moment before all was now silence as the young man was hurried back through the crowd and out into another alley, where a closed carriage stood at the curb. He was roughly forced inside, two of the men following him, the third climbing up with the driver, who immediately applied his whip to the horses and sent the vehicle rattling away.

An icy chill came creeping over Maudsley's heart. The whole adventure now seemed like a nightmare. He seemed possessed of a desire to shriek aloud, and each succeeding turn of the wheels only added to his horror, for there sat his companions, grimly watching every change of his face. To address them was useless. At the outset Maudsley tried it. Whether they understood him, whether they could speak English or not, he never knew, for they were utterly oblivious to all he said.

Through street after street they whirled. Again and again the young tenor appealed to them, but their stolid faces never changed, their lips never moved. Maudsley felt only too well assured that if he were to carry out his impulse—break the glass in the carriage-door and shout for help—those glittering blades would be instantly buried in his heart.

On they dashed, turning corner after corner. In what direction they were going the prisoner could not even guess; the only familiar object which caught his eye was the pointed, slender tower of the church of Saints Peter and Paul. There were twenty turns made after that, and at last they rattled over a bridge and Maudsley knew that they were across the Neva. Still the mad rush continued, and soon they were in the Viborg Quarter. Then the man on Maudsley's right, glancing out of the window, said something in Russian, speaking now for the first time.

"It's no use to speak to me in anything but English," flashed the young man. "I have told you over and over again that I can't speak your language. You have made a mistake. I am an American, one of the concert company performing at the Grand Duke, and——"

"Stop!" said the man suddenly. "We neither know nor care who you are or what you are. Save your breath. I only asked you if you would like to smoke."

He produced a gold cigarette-case and passed it to the prisoner. Here seemed to be a ray of hope. Maudsley accepted the cigarette and then a light.

"So it seems that you can understand me," he said. "Surely I have the right to ask what all this means. I only dropped into that place by accident. I—I—know—I know no more. I——"

Two whiffs began it and the third settled it. A mist came before the young man's eyes; the faces of the two men seemed to dilate to enormous proportions; his own voice appeared to reverberate like thunder; there was a strange thickening of the tongue; it seemed to fill his whole mouth and choke him.

Of course, the drugged cigarette did it. Realizing this, he threw it down, and, with one mighty effort, flung himself upon the man on his right and seized him by the throat. But his fingers took but a feeble hold; the man pushed him back and his head dropped forward.

Up to this point Maudsley remembered, but of all that followed he knew nothing until he was suddenly awakened by hearing a loud burst of laughter in his ears. He opened his eyes to find himself lying stretched out at full length upon a table under a brilliant light, strapped down and nearly naked, with a dozen or more white-robed men crowded around, talking volubly in Russian, and about him, if their rapid, nervous gestures went for anything. But silence suddenly fell upon them as they caught sight of the young man's open eyes and they hurriedly drew away. Maudsley's heart stood still, for his eyes had singled out one tall, determined-looking man, who stood close beside the table, with his coat off, his shirt-sleeves rolled up, holding a surgeon's knife. Right behind him was a small table, on which a full line of dissecting instruments were laid—knives, lancets, saws, etc.

"Gentlemen!" Maudsley gasped, "for heaven's sake listen to me! Is there no one here who understands English? This is all a mistake."

He struggled to free himself as he shouted out these words. But if his bonds had been of iron he could not have been held more firmly.

No one answered. The men were all young, stalwart fellows. To Maudsley they looked as if they might be

medical students. As his eyes roamed hurriedly from face to face several turned away, as though fearing recognition. Then, standing among them a little to one side, he caught sight of one familiar countenance—it was the girl he had followed into the night-house at the end of the alley. It seemed to him that she looked at him with pitying eyes. Suddenly the brilliant electric light overhead was extinguished. Out of the darkness a voice spoke. The words were hurried and earnest, but utterly unintelligible to Maudsley. As the voice ceased speaking, he burst out with a second appeal.

"Give me at least a chance for life!" he cried. "I cannot be the person you suppose, for I am a stranger in Petrograd. I never set foot on Russian soil until four days ago. Inquire at the Imperial Hotel on Novgorod street, and you will find that I am telling the truth."

"Chut!" called a voice out of the darkness. "Sir, we know you not. You say you American. We no care if you Deutschman, Frenchman. We know not who—what—where! So! You swallow him—ve vant him—ve vill haf him!"

Slowly but most emphatically the words were uttered, the darkness making them all the more impressive. Then all at once the light flared up again. The students had crowded around the dissecting-table, but their faces were concealed by handkerchiefs which had been tied under the eyes.

The man who held the knife now approached the table, another sprang to Maudsley's head, seizing it between his hands, another still took up a sponge and poured something upon it out of a bottle. A strong scent of ether filled the room.

At this critical moment Maudsley again caught the girl's pitying eye. He seemed to read her thoughts, to know that his only chance lay in an appeal to her.

A sudden inspiration seized Maudsley, and he broke out into song, his rich tenor filling the room. It was the Cavatina from the third act of "Faust," one of Maudsley's favorite numbers:

> "What is it that charms me,
> And with passion true and tender warms me?
> Oh, Margarita! Thy unworthy slave am I!"

The students stared and some laughed, seeming to understand. That the girl was moved was certain. A flash of intelligence crossed her face and she blushed, and then, in a clear, ringing soprano, sang in perfect Italian, Margarita's opening words in the next scene:

> "I wish I could but know who was he that addressed me;
> If he was noble, or at least what his name is!"

Her voice was divine, her intonation perfect; no one but a professional, or one thoroughly familiar with the score of Gounod's masterpiece could have thus responded to Maudsley's appeal.

The students, who had laughed, applauded, and a dozen voices began talking together. The girl, with a gesture or silence, spoke hurried words in Russian to the man with the knife, laid her hand beseechingly upon his arm, pointed at Maudsley, gesticulating earnestly, but he somewhat roughly pushed her away.

Down came the fatal sponge. As it pressed against the young man's nose, hope left him, and the sickening sensations of approaching anesthesia seized his brain. He could still hear the girl rapidly speaking in that strange, harsh tongue, so different from the soft Italian in which they had sung.

Suddenly one word seemed to single itself out from all the rest and to fairly burn its way into Maudsley's dulled brain.

Roentgen!

Through his mind flashed the recollection of this wonder of science, and then Maudsley dropped off into the land of dreams. It seemed to him that he was still lying on the dissecting-table, that the sponge was suddenly removed, that the girl was still making her appeal.

"Roentgen!" she said again. "Roentgen!"

He seemed to hear her distinctly, and yet he felt that it was but a dream, when the man with the knife flung it suddenly to the floor and shouted something in a most excited way, at the same time seizing the girl's hand.

Then suddenly the dream changed and the scene shifted. It was another room, partially darkened. Around the walls hung skeletons and articulated bones, a leg here, an arm there; here a row of skulls on a shelf, there strange things in glass jars floating in alcohol, between them illuminated charts and diagrams illustrating various dissections of the human body and other similar things.

Maudsley, in his spare moments, had been something of an amateur in photography and greatly interested in the discoveries pertaining to the X-ray. He saw resting upon a table before him—he seemed to be seated in a chair, still naked as when on the dissecting-table—a new induction coil and a lot of other familiar electrical apparatus. A four-cell battery stood under the table and a pair of Crookes tubes and a curious-looking box completed the equipment.

Suddenly the room was still further darkened and the battery began to sing, a Crookes tube, being put in the circuit, placed at Maudsley's back. Of course, he could not see this, but in his dream he seemed to know that it was there.

Then the man who had handled the dissecting knife put his eye to the small end of the box. Long and earnestly he peered in. The truth dawned upon Maudsley. He knew that similar experiments had been made in an American university, and with such complete success that, to the observer at the peep-hole in the box, the whole interior of a man's anatomy had practically been laid bare.

Suddenly the man at the peep-hole straightened up and took the box away. He bent over the battery for an instant and then called out something in Russian. Every man present turned and looked toward the rear of the room.

The girl, who was standing near Maudsley, caught his head between her hands and turned it also. To the young man's utter astonishment there, thrown upon a white screen, was the shadowy reflection of his own naked torso, visible from the neck down to the hips. The outlines were distinct; the naked flesh seemed to offer no hindrance to his vision.

Maudsley could see through himself, so to speak; could count his own ribs; detect his heart and note its pulsations; see the walls of his stomach—see through them and plainly distinguish the vertebræ behind.

A stifled exclamation burst simultaneously from every one present. The man at the battery seized a long stick—it seemed to be a billiard cue—and pointed to the stomach on the screen, speaking rapidly all the while. Then there was a cheer and the current was suddenly turned off. The picture vanished and a light blazed up overhead.

"Ah, so, my good friend," said the voice, which had previously tried its hand at English, "you are save! Ze papaire not in ze stoomach! Ze X-ray—he cannot lie!"

With the flashing of the light Maudsley returned to full command of himself. The men, whose faces were still concealed, pressed about him, all eagerness to shake his hand, but the girl only smiled and glided from the room.

One now brought the young tenor's clothes, another assisted him to put them on. Who had spoken English Maudsley did not know, for no one would speak it now, but each seemed to vie the other in polite attentions, and before Maudsley was fully dressed in came champagne and cigars.

Corks popped and glasses clinked, but the trouble was not all over yet, it seemed, for suddenly a cloth was thrown over the young man's head from behind and he was seized and hurried from the room. But they handled him gently, and soon Maudsley found himself once more rattling through the streets of Petrograd, still blindfolded, with a guard on either side. And as he rode on, the scene in the café came back to him and he remembered the paper pellet which the stranger had thrust into his mouth.

The carriage suddenly stopped, the cloth was snatched from his head, and he was thrust out into the street, only to find himself standing before the Imperial Hotel.

The prefect of police was waiting for him in the hotel parlor.

"I have called to explain the reason for the attack upon you to-night," he said to Maudsley. "We got wind of the fact that there was to be an uprising of the nihilists in Moscow, simultaneous with a revolt in this city. The leaders of the nihilists in Moscow were to be notified of the hour when the blow was to be struck by receipt of a communication written on a small piece of paper.

"This note was to be carried to them by a man of your description. Evidently your close resemblance to the man who had been chosen as a messenger deceived the plotters as well as it had the female detective whom I sent to lure you into the vodka shop. You were simply rushed to a hospital and put under an X-ray, as we suspected that the nihilists' emissary had thrust the paper pellet into your mouth and that you had swallowed it. As our examination of your intestines and stomach failed to reveal the presence of this paper, we concluded that we have made an error."

"You made no error," said Maudsley, "for here is the paper you are searching for. When the paper was thrust in my mouth I stuck it into a hollow tooth, and for that reason you failed to find it."

He handed the paper to the chief of police, much to the gentlemen's astonishment, and the prefect took his departure.

The following day Mausdley learned the secret police of Russia had rounded up the nihilists and clapped them all in jail.

OLDEST LIVING WOMAN

IN the city of Posen, in the German province of the same name, the oldest woman in the world is about to enter upon the 134th year of her life, unless death has overtaken her since the receipt of the latest news from that part of Europe. She is Frau Gretchen Dutkiewitz, and she has spent practically all her life in Posen. She was a young woman when Napoleon and his legions swept like a conflagration over Europe, and has lived to see a similar catastrophe engulf almost the entire civilized world. Frederick the Great was still alive when Frau Dutkiewitz was born, and only a few years before Voltaire had gone to his long rest. The German Empire of to-day was then an aggregation of petty, warring states, and the American Union had just been born out of the travail of revolution. Three centuries—the eighteenth, the nineteenth and the twentieth—this woman has seen, and within the compass of her lifetime a new civilization has sprung up in Europe and America, a civilization now in the balance, and threatened by the land which gave her birth.

THE TOWER OF BABEL

THE Tower of Babel was only 140 feet high, but as it was built upon an elevated foundation it was the loftiest object in Babylon, a city of low buildings, spread over a flat plain. This description of the most famous structure of ancient times has been obtained from recent translations of old Assyrian records, some inscribed on tablets of burnt clay.

The Tower was a temple and the architectural pride of Babylon. The lowest of its seven stories was 272 feet square, and it was constructed of the only available material, sun-dried brick, faced with burned brick. It was probably topped with an astronomical observatory, or rather one for the use of astrologists, a calling followed by many priests of Babylonia.

Babylon, with a population of 2,000,000, was then the metropolis of the world, and its great area, twice that of London, was encircled by a wall fifty-five miles in length.

The Tower of Babel was a temple containing wonderful golden statues and other treasures, and it was in attempting to describe these that the tongues of men were confused.

LIVES IN THREE COUNTIES AND FOUR TOWNSHIPS

LIVING in three counties and four townships sounds more like the experience of a lifetime, yet to Miss Grace Gleason, of Sheldahl, it is an every day occurrence. For the town is so laid out that certain parts occupy space in three counties, but since the school is in one, in Polk, it is considered to be in Polk County, Iowa.

Miss Gleason is a teacher in the school. When she wakes up in the morning she is in Lincoln Township, Polk County, for the house in which she rooms is so located. For breakfast she travels over into the next county, Story. Of course the house might be just next door, or even across the street, but it is in Palestine Township.

Her next trip is probably to Lincoln Township, Polk County, where she teaches in the grades. Back again to Palestine Township, Story County, is the trip for lunch.

Afternoon is spent in Lincoln Township. Dinner in Palestine may be followed by prayer meeting. That means she has to go into the fourth different township of the day. The last journey of the day is to her rooming place.

To some Miss Gleason's daily life may seem like a regular magic carpet affair—this changing from one place to another at nearly every move—but to her it is nothing extraordinary.

THE RENEGADE DETECTIVE

A Serial Story

By RANDOLPH BADGER

CHAPTER FIVE

CHIQUITA'S STORY

CAMILLE was white and trembling as she watched the departure, and another fear suddenly assailed her which she had not thought of while he was in the room

The evidence against her as the murderess of Arthur Desmond! Before she laughed at it, knowing that it was in her power to dissipate it like chaff before the wind; but now she could not refute anything. She was suspected of being the authoress of the crime without an extenuating circumstance in her favor; nor could she disprove of it, except at the sacrifice of her husband's liberty, and perhaps his life. Who can imagine her despair? She would have died to save Ralph, if Providence permitted, but everything was against her. She had no recourse, but must remain suspected of this atrocious deed until it pleased the rascally Joslin to give her a chance to vindicate herself. It was almost more than she could bear, and she burst out crying.

A knock came at the door after a few minutes, and Chiquita entered. Since the burial of Arthur Desmond the girl had become silent and moody.

"Camille!" she exclaimed, approaching the weeping woman.

"Oh, Chiquita, is that you?"

"What disturbs you?"

"Your husband has just been here."

"Oh!" exclaimed Chiquita, pausing breathlessly.

"He is a villain, Chiquita!"

"Only too well do I know it, dear Camille. What did he want?"

She told her of his perfidy, the Spanish girl listening in horror.

"I am in his power," she said, in anguish.

"Then it was your husband at the tavern. I did not know it. But this rascality is just the way of that inhuman fiend!"

"What shall I do?"

"I know not."

"You say that you hate your husband?"

"I wish he were dead this instant!"

"Note the difference between us. You hate your husband, I love mine."

"Ah!" sighed Chiquita, "all marriages are not happy."

"Then how came you to marry a man you do not love?"

"It was a fatality—a dire misfortune, Camille."

"Will you tell me what your trouble was?"

"The recital of one's burdens is not entertaining."

"Nevertheless, I would like to hear yours for a certain reason."

"And what is that?"

"You recollect when I just told you all that passed between Joslin and me, he said that he intended to accomplish something before he left this place and restored my husband to me again."

"Ah! Yes. But—— If it is what I suspect——"

"You know what he intends to do?"

"I have an impression, although I may be mistaken."

"Should it be that he contemplates doing a wrong we may baffle him?"

"Useless! Once he embarks on an enterprise, nothing can stop him."

"But what is it you fear he is about to accomplish?"

"I will tell you, but to do so properly, let me give you a brief biography of my life. I never told you before, and it is now time I did."

"Proceed, my dear friend," said Camille, as the other sat beside her on the sofa.

"Well," commenced Chiquita, "as you know, I am of Spanish birth. Delano Joslin was the second officer of a steamer plying between New York and Cadiz. My father having removed from Madrid with my mother and myself to the Spanish Main, I met Joslin, and he induced me to marry him and come here to New York. I did not know what love was, but becoming infatuated with the glib-tongued American, I at once imagined that I loved him. How soon this delusion was dissipated you will soon see. I had not lived with him long, when I discovered that he was an evil-minded man, addicted to gambling and strong drinks. A son was born to us, and my husband's nature grew worse. Finally, he left his steamer, and lived by his wits. In a word, he became an adventurer. He began to beat and abuse me frightfully, and despite this maltreatment I clung to him, and strove to do all in my power to win him from his dissolute ways and make him become a better man. Alas, Camille, my efforts were only wasted. He forced my boy-baby to beg for him in the streets, and spent the paltry pennies the poor little fellow brought home to purchase liquors. This was kept up for a year, I meantime living on the charity of my neighbors. Finally, he deserted me, taking my boy with him. From that day to this I have never seen my child."

"But he came back?" queried Camille, much moved.

"Yes; but only to recommence his brutality in a most diabolical way. His malignant nature devised the most devilish means to torture me. Later on, he suddenly became more tidy in his appearance, and seemed to have plenty of money. He would not tell me where he got it any more than he would tell me what became of my child. At last our wretched home became a resort of wicked-looking men who acted very mysteriously. Soon their numbers were added to by two gentlemen vastly different in appearance from the rest. They were honest men who had become slaves to the games of chance. One of these men was Ralph Desmond!"

"My husband! I knew it!" exclaimed Camille, in anguish.

"Yes—he was your husband. The other was a mere boy

in years, although to all appearance he was a man. Both had money, and it was this money that my wretched husband and his friends wanted. The young man had just come from abroad—India, I believe he said, where he had been in the English army, from which he finally procured his discharge to return to America, to see his aged father. This young man was strangely similar to my husband in appearance. They looked like twins, excepting their age."

"What was his name?" asked Camille, who became interested.

"Harry Fulton!"

"Why!" cried Camille, "he must have been the son of old Captain Dan Fulton, the retired sea captain, whose grounds adjoin those of Brierly."

"He was," said Chiquita, sadly.

"He was?"

"I use the past tense because he is no more."

"What—dead? His poor father. He yet patiently expects his son home."

"Caramba!" said Chiquita, "he will wait in vain for the original, for he will never come."

"Chiquita, was there foul play?" said the other, in startled tones.

"Murder!" whispered Chiquita, thrillingly.

"Ah! And your husband?"

"I do not know, but suspect he did it. The man's money—his unknown arrival—a horrible scheme to substitute himself for the old captain's son!"

"Then this plan Delano Joslin means to perpetrate before going away is to go to the old man, calling himself his long absent son? And for what?"

"He is old, and will soon die. The son will be the only heir."

"Ah, such a diabolical intrigue. And we can prevent it!"

"Why not? Can I not try?"

"Can you not see I am in his power, as long as he has possession of my husband?"

"You are right! Let me finish my story, although there is little to tell. I discovered his plot, and tried to rescue the young soldier and your husband from his clutches. He imagined that your husband was my lover, because I tried to save him, and hated him for it. For my pains they tried to kill me. Dragged from the house in an insensible state, I only remember that one cold winter's night you and Arthur Desmond took me in. My debt of gratitude can never be repaid, but believe me, Heaven will surely give me an opportunity of reciprocating in some manner."

As she paused the clock struck eleven, and both arose to retire. After they had left the room one of the window curtains shook, a head was protruded cautiously from behind it, a quick glance was cast around—the coast was seen to be clear, then Simon Jigger stepped out.

* * * * *

James Thorn, the renegade detective, was known by the sleuths of the bureau to be an officer who never missed his man; money could not bribe him to deviate from his duty, and he was actuated by his own particular views respecting any case he was handling. His nature was very acrimonious, thoughtful and uncommunicative.

Never before in all his eventful career had he been false to his profession, and it must have been an all-powerful incentive that induced him to renegade himself. He boasted that nothing could force him to prove untrue to his vocation; his boast was at last disqualified.

When once he had taken this case, however, he meant to leave no stone unturned to protect Camille, for it gave him no small amount of uneasiness to observe with what assiduity Simon Jigger pressed the case. Jigger had secured himself the position of a private detective, and in this capacity took up his abode at the Red Shield with Slinky Sammy.

It became necessary for Thorn to be vigilant, for Jigger was a shrewd fellow and had an uncomforting way of prying at all unseasonable times, turning up in out-of-the-way locations when least expected, and jotting down the most minute details in a note-book, which showed that he did not mean to lose any point that might be of a service to him. Thorn was uneasy about it, and shadowed the little man constantly. Where Jigger found a means to sustain himself could not be discovered; but he paid his own and Sammy's board regularly in advance, and even partook of luxuries.

He was not a man to waste any money upon clothing, however, for in the four months that passed by he had not even so much as purchased a shot-string for himself.

In order to have his man directly under his eye, Thorn put up at the same tavern; and there they were, one like a mouse waiting to run at a dainty morsel, the other like a hawk to swoop down on the mouse as soon as he ventured to capture the morsel.

During this time, Joslin had quietly been figuring as Harry Fulton!

He had presented himself to the old sea-dog with a fine bit of emotional acting, after youthifying his appearance, and was accepted as his son.

To insure no doubt of anything wrong in his false representation, he handed over to his prospective father twenty-five thousand dollars, which he claimed to have earned abroad, and begged old Dan to procure him some position whereat he might keep his mind occupied. This was accordingly done by the simple-minded old sailor, who was delighted to have near him the son from whom he had been parted many years.

Harry Fulton had been a student in London, and, knowing his father would oppose his enlistment in the army, he had left college, enlisted at the age of twenty, without his father's consent, and immediately thereafter his regiment had been ordered to India. It almost broke the old sailor's heart when the wayward son communicated this fact to him, but as the trouble had been consummated and could not be rectified, Dan was obliged to content himself with the receipt of irregular correspondence from Harry.

When the wife of the old sailor died, his son was homeward bound, intending to surprise his parents by his return, and the letter which contained the news of his mother's death never reached the young man. It was when he landed that he fell into Joslin's clutches, with all his back pay. The wily rascal easily elicited all his history, and then one night rowed him out on the river, and, stabbing the young man, threw him into the swift current that bore the body out toward the sea. This was done with the intention of consummating the scheme which he now had successfully carried out, and he realized that when old Dan died he would become the possessor of several millions.

As Dan had not seen his son in five years, and the resemblance between him and Joslin was so great, it was no wonder that the rascal duped his aged victim so easily. All he now required was time to develop the accomplishment of his expectations.

(To be continued.)

CURRENT NEWS

GUINEA EGGS IN SNAKE

Upon cutting open a snake that he had killed, L. D. Olford, of Colquitt County, Ga., found seven guinea eggs inside the reptile. He placed the eggs under a setting hen and a few days later seven little guineas were hatched. They are all called "Jonah."

PASTOR'S THREE BROTHERS DIE IN FEW WEEKS

Three brothers of Rev. Charles W. Devol, a Santa Rosa, Cal., minister, have dropped dead suddenly within the past few months. The first died some time ago. A few weeks ago a second brother, a missionary in the Orient, dropped dead, and recently Rev. Devol received a telegram stating that a third brother had died under similar circumstances in an Eastern city.

FRIED CACTUS POPULAR

The growing of spineless cactus, whose food value is now well known, has become an increasingly important industry in the Southwest because war conditions are demanding the development of every available source of food. The fruit of the cactus, known as tuna, is eaten raw or preserved, says *Popular Mechanics*. A not uncommon practice is to peel the young shoots and fry them in batter or dip them in syrup to make a confection.

FIND LOST ENGAGEMENT RING IN A MINCE PIE

Somewhere in France Fred Bogardus, one of the young men from Poughkeepsie, N. Y., who is an active member of the American committee which is preparing to entertain the kaiser, has been worrying over the announcement from Miss Maude Lucas, three months ago, that she had lost the engagement ring he gave her.

Fred can now devote his entire time to the big Hun hunt for his fiancée, who lives at Plutarch, Ky., found the ring in a sector of mince pie.

GIANT IN HIS FALL DERAILS A HANDCAR

While Waddy Bambro, of Millville, N. J., was riding on a handcar on the West Jersey Seashore Railroad he fell in front of the car, which was moving rapidly.

Bambro is a laborer of remarkable stature and strength, and when he fell his companions expected to find him ground to pieces.

His heavy weight, however, derailed the car and threw his four fellow workmen into a ditch beside the track. He was brought to Millville Hospital, where his only injury was found to be a scalp wound.

WEALTHY INDIAN SLEEPS ON PORCH

On a tract of land in Oklahoma, allotted to Jackson Barrett, a Creek Indian, and on which it is not recorded that he ever did a stroke of work, oil was discovered. Jackson's income is said to be $50,000 a month from oil royalties.

He has a cabin, erected for him by the superintendent of the five tribes, but he prefers to live in the open. At night he wraps himself in a blanket and sleeps on the porch. His property is now said to be worth $800,000. He bought a block of Liberty bonds, and single taxers are using him as a terrible example.

ICED FISH CHOPPED FROM INDIANA LAKE

The residents of Petersburg, Ind., have been eating cheap fish during the last few days. While cutting a hole in the ice on the edge of the government ditch three miles west of here, Harvey Hays found a big fish frozen in the ice. He cleared off the snow and soon found others. In a few minutes he had chopped out ten big carp and buffalo. All were frozen.

The next day 100 pounds of iced fish were chopped out. Other big ponds have been visited, and in some instances big catches are found in the ice, which in places is sixteen inches thick.

WHAT CANTONMENTS COST

Nearly $300 per soldier, or a total of $187,000,000, was the cost of the sixteen army cantonments built last summer and fall to house 650,000 men, says *Popular Mechanics*. The original estimate of the cost was $134,000,000. This huge construction job was carried forward with a speed that is considered truly remarkable. By the end of last May, when Congress was still debating the project, the engineering corps was fully organized for work. Within three months from that time cantonments capable of housing 300,000 men were completed, while by December 5th there were accommodations for the entire 650,000 men.

COLD RAIL NIPS OFF A WILDCAT'S TONGUE

While running a shifting engine to a mine in the Snow Shoe region of Pennsylvania, when the thermometer registered 22 degrees below zero, the crew noticed a wildcat on the tracks ahead, apparently caught by the head.

When the locomotive struck the animal it ran into the woods with a gurgling cry. On investigation the men found the cat's tongue hanging to the rail.

The wildcat had come to a spring near by and evidently stepped into the water, with the result that when it was crossing the tracks and stepped on a frosty rail its foot immediately froze fast. In attempting to lick its foot loose the cat's tongue was caught.

HAWK GETS CANARY

A Chinese woman and her three little children came marching proudly up Kearny street, San Francisco, Cal. They carried a cage and a canary.

At Commercial street the door of the cage came open and the bird flew out. It lighted on a wire overhead. Pedestrians gathered around and helped the woman and the children try to coax it down.

The canary hopped about and defied them for a while. Then all of a sudden it fluttered down toward the walk. But it was not quick enough. Before it alighted a sparrow hawk swooped down from somewhere and grabbed it.

There was a squeak and a flutter of wings almost within reach of the people on the sidewalk. Then the hawk and its prey flew down Commercial street and was gone.

ACCIDENT REVEALED CALIFORNIA GOLD

Gold was discovered in California seventy years ago by James Wilson Marshall, a native of New Jersey, who had gone West and settled on the site of Sacramento. Blasting away rock to make a foundation for a building, he observed grains of what seemed to be gold. He took specimens to General Sutter at Sutter's Fort, who made tests which proved the presence of the precious metal.

Wild excitement followed the discovery, and the rush of the Forty-niners brought thousands of miners and adventurers to California. Marshall did not profit from his find, and would have spent his last days in poverty except for a small pension granted by the State of California.

BOLIVIAN POTATO PRODUCTION

In a very instructive report, published in a recent "Bulletin of the Geographical Society of La Paz" by its president, some interesting facts concerning the potato production in certain countries of South America are presented. It seems that at the weekly and annual potato fairs in many important trading towns on the plateaus of Peru and Bolivia scores of varieties of potatoes (the report identifies 184) are offered for barter in numberless sacks and giant heaps. It is worth while knowing that in the Bolivian and Peruvian tablelands and high mountain valleys the potato continues to form the chief and in may places almost the only vegetable food of the farmers and shepherds.

WOMEN SAVE FOR BULLETS

University of Kansas women have been asked to save tin foil, tooth paste tubes and other metal containers, scraps of aluminum, copper and lead, old fruit jar lids, electric light bulbs, cold cream jars and medicine bottles as part of the campaign at the university to save waste material and sell it.

A salvage committee has been appointed by the director of women's war work here, Miss Margaret Lynn, and this committee will collect all waste material. The money obtained from the sale of these articles will be used in some war work. Material will be collected every Thursday, but a special place has been designated so that women can bring their salvage on any day of the week.

SMOKING AIDS MIND

The smoker is a better mathematician than the nonsmoker, according to a report in the *Psychological Bulletin*, made by Prof. C. S. Berry. The professor decided to test his theory that smoking encourages mental alertness.

On alternate days he refrained from enjoying his weed, and on the two days between he indulged. Immediately after smoking a cigar he added several long columns of figures, keeping records of his mistakes and speed. The experiment was tried the next day, when he did not smoke.

According to Professor Berry, he found that his accuracy was about equal on both occasions, but his speed was 7.7 per cent. greater on the day that he smoked. Many tests of this theory showed the correctness of this estimate.

THE FIRST EXPRESS COMPANY

The first express company in America was launched seventy-nine years ago, when an advertisement appeared in the Boston and New York papers announcing that "William F. Harnden has made arrangements with the Providence Railroad and the New York Boat Company to run a car through from Boston to New York and vice versa four times weekly. He will accompany the car himself, take care of all small packages that may be entrusted to his care, and see them safely delivered." To-day Harnden might be prosecuted for publishing a misleading advertisement, for his "express car" was entirely imaginary, and he carried parcels in a valise. Harnden had long been a conductor on the railway, and his former associates permitted him to travel without charge. The railroad got nothing in the way of express charges. Harnden's first competitor was Alvin Adams, who became the founder of the Adams Express Company.

WHEN THE FLAG BECAME "OLD GLORY"

William Driver, a Salem, Mass., sea captain, is said to have first applied "Old Glory" to the Stars and Stripes. In December, 1831, when he was about to set sail from Salem on the brig *Charles Doggett*, bound for the South Sea Islands, he was presented by friends with a handsome flag. When the colors were hoisted to the halyards, Captain Driver exclaimed: "There is Old Glory!"

Those who heard the remark repeated it, the newspapers took it up, and the name spread over the land. After many wild adventures, including a clash with the cannibal islanders of the South Seas, Captain Driver returned to America and decided to settle down.

He chose Nashville as his place of residence, and when the Civil War broke out he was one of a very few adherents of the Union cause in the Tennessee capital. The flag which he had called "Old Glory" he had carefully preserved, and when he displayed it from the window of his house it was fired upon and riddled with bullets. The retired skipper decided that Old Glory was not popular in Nashville at that time and put it away until the Federals had taken Nashville. Captain Driver presented Old Glory to General Nelson, who raised it over the State Capitol. After the war the flag was presented to the Essex Institute in Boston, where it is now carefully preserved.

TESTING PSYCHOLOGY IN THE ARMY

Some astonishing results obtained from psychological tests in the American army are reported in *The Medical Record* in the case of recent examinations at Camp Dix, New Jersey, as to mental fitness for military service:

"When the chief examiner of the psychological department needed a staff of clerks and assistants he asked the division headquarters to assign the necessary men from the depot brigade. The authorities told him he might have the whole brigade from which to choose. As a result six hundred men were subjected to the psychological tests and the eighty highest were chosen for department service without knowing their occupations or military rank.

"It was found that by the test the examiners had practically stripped the organization of the men who saw that the orders from the officers were carried out by the men in the ranks, and that it was necessary to make some other adjustment. Such a finding as this is regarded as highly satisfactory from two standpoints.

"It has given great satisfaction to the men interested in the psychological tests as a proof of the accuracy of these tests and it is also a compliment to the system that enables line officers to pick for important positions men whose mental scores were later shown to be of high average. However, the psychologists claim that their method has the advantage on its side, since it enables them to make a successful choice in fifty minutes whereas it takes the officers a number of weeks to make a suitable selection."

VENTILATED COSTUMES

Even in the Arctic circle, there is danger of perspiring when the temperature is endeavoring to drop through the thermometer. The colder the weather the greater the danger. Swathed in heavy furs, as the white man does, he may get overheated while traveling. When he stops to make camp, he will freeze in a very short time. Terrible suffering is the result.

The Eskimo has solved the problem of how to keep warm without perspiring, in a simple but original manner, as explained by explorer Christian Leden in *Popular Science Monthly*. Instead of covering himself completely with Arctic furs, he leaves some portion of his body partly uncovered. This allows the air to penetrate between his heavy furs and his body and ventilates his costume.

If the Eskimo woman from East Greenland remains out of doors for some time in the most severe part of the year, she covers the middle of the open space above her boots with belts of fox-tails, but adjusted in such a way that she will get the necessary air ventilation.

In North Greenland the men's suits have an open space around the waist, between the coat and trousers, while the Greenland tribes in northern Canada wear wide, short trousers, which expose the knee and part of the leg to the cold air. The leg may be partly protected when walking or working.

SHOOTING BALLOONS

Toy balloon shooting in the clouds has entered the arena of American sports as an exhilarating and dignified diversion for leisurely gentlemen of means and red-blooded tendencies. Its introduction has been made in southern California under the auspices of the Bolsa Chica and Los Angeles gun clubs, some of whose members are its first patrons and devotees.

Balloon shooting is accomplished with the aid of aeroplanes, and reduced to its last analysis amounts to an ultra modern adaptation of the English hunt, and might fittingly be called an aero-nautical chase, says *Popular Mechanics*. Bright-colored balloons as large as bushel baskets are released at the ground in bunches of about twenty-five and pursued through cloud banks and clear expanses by gunners in pusher planes. Thus the thrills of flying, the sport of shooting, and the excitement of the chase are combined in one high-speed pastime. The Los Angeles clubs have acquired the services of a professional airman and his three machines for the purpose of determining the possibilities of the idea. The first time it was tried out a man, who uses the pump gun effectively on clay pigeons, "bagged" 14 out of 25 balloons in 50 shots. The others escaped. The sport may appeal strongly to our returned airmen when peace is eventually restored.

THE MEMORY OF FISHES

Even the fishes of the sea have pictures on memory's wall. Experiments have been made with several fishes as to their faculties for remembering, but the most striking results have been obtained with the gray perch, which lives chiefly on a small silver-hued sardine. Some of these were taken and colored red and were then put into the tank where the perch was, with several silver-colored sardines. Of course, the normal sardines were at once seized and eaten, but it was not until hungry that the perch made a tentative meal of one of the red-colored victims.

On recognizing the sardine flavor, however, he promptly demolished the remainder. Later the perch devoured the sardines irrespective of color, thus showing not only traces of a memory, but also the power to differentiate color, says the Pittsburg Press.

Subsequently sardines colored red and blue were placed in the tank together with the silver ones. The same scene was repeated, the blue sardines not being attacked until the others were eaten and hunger compelled investigation of the newcomers. After this introduction the perch ate the sardines of all three types without any difficulty.

Some spines of the sea nettle were then fastened to the blue sardines. These were at once avoided by the perch, who promptly got out of the way of the newcomers. This showed traces of memory, as the results of contact with the sea nettle were shown and recognized.

SEWS WITH HER TONGUE

More than forty years ago an unknown dread disease, which is to-day called infantile paralysis, affected Fannie Tunison, the infant daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Tunison, of Sag Harbor, N. Y. The child was totally paralyzed in the limbs, the only motion she could make being with the neck and head.

To-day in her Sag Harbor home Fannie Tunison paints, embroiders, writes and manufactures novelties with her tongue. She has declined hundreds of offers to join circuses and shows. She is content to stay in her modest home where all the day long she is happy and cheerful at her work.

To make herself useful and aid her father, her mother having long since died, she has sacrificed her power of speech. Her tongue has become so developed that her speech is inarticulate.

The work produced is not only unique because of its unusual character, but compares favorably with that of many an amateur artist or needlewoman.

Now a mature woman, some of the work turned out by Miss Tunison is nothing less than marvelous. She is cheerful and never so happy as when at work. Her father is a carpenter, and each morning places his daughter in a chair which he has especially made for her comfort and convenience. She is strapped into position by strong bands, and while thus held in the chair she makes pretty crayon drawings, uses oil and water colors for her sketches, manufactures fancy figured blotters and pen-wipers, makes bookmarkers and maps and the most marvelously designed embroidery is executed. Mats, doilies, table cloths and paper flowers are also made by the invalid, and just now Miss Tunison has turned her attention to decorated Christmas cards, which find her a ready sale.

To paint or draw, Miss Tunison picks up in her teeth from the trap in front of her a pencil or paint brush. From constant use, her tongue and neck muscles have become much enlarged and strong. With a few rapid motions the sketch takes form. In an hour or half hour it is completed.

To sew, the invalid picks up a needle with her teeth, grasps it between her teeth, puts the point in the wooden tray in front of her; next takes up a spool of thread or silk, measures off the required length, bites the thread with her teeth, takes the thread with tongue and teeth and thrusts it through the eye of the needle which faces her. The task is accomplished with little effort. Then comes the tying of the knot in the thread. She rolls the thread around in her mouth and the educated tongue has tied the knot. When it is necessary Miss Tunison uses scissors and with almost magic precision cuts cloth or paper, shaping the latter into fancy designs or beautiful flowers.

FIRST UMBRELLA

It was 148 years ago that an umbrella was first seen on the streets of an American city. Baltimore has the honor of introducing that most useful contrivance. To the hardy Marylanders of that period the umbrella was an effeminate device, and the man who first carried one was hooted and jeered.

The Baltimore umbrella was a French importation, crude and heavy, and bore slight resemblance to the umbrella of to-day. Early English and American dictionaries defined the umbrella as "a portable penthouse to carry in a person's hand to screen him from violent rain or sun."

Portable they were, but far too heavy for the average woman.

France, Spain and Italy were the first European countries to adopt the umbrella, which came to them from the Orient, where it had been used for centuries and was considered a symbol of royalty and dignity. In England, as on this side of the Atlantic, the umbrella was at first greeted with scorn. Jonas Hanway, the philanthropist, is said to have been the first Englishman who generally used an umbrella in the streets of London. The umbrella was bitterly denounced by the hackney coachmen, who carried on a prosperous business on rainy days, and who feared that a general adoption of the device would work injury to their trade.

Some eight years after the first umbrella had been introduced into America, John Macdonald, a London footman, wrote an autobiography in which he remarked that he possessed "a fine silk umbrella," which he brought from Spain, but which he could not use in the streets of London because of the taunts of the ppulace.

FLAWLESS EMERALDS MOST PRECIOUS STONES

An Emerald free from flaw would be the most precious of all stones, maintain experts of the Smithsonian Institution in a recently published bulletin. The emerald is unfortunately seldom flawless, and were this not the case the emerald would be of greater value than the diamond.

A good diamond to-day is worth from $250 to $400 a carat, according to its purity and size, while an emerald varies in value from $350 to $500 a carat, increasing rapidly with size. Flawless emeralds weighing more than four carats are among the rarest jewels; a perfect stone of four carats is virtually priceless, whereas a diamond of equal weight would bring only $1,000 to $2,000.

It is probable that all the emeralds of the ancients came from the so-called Cleopatra emerald mines in Upper Egypt, worked as early as 1650 B. C., abandoned and lost sight of during the Middle Ages, but rediscovered early in the nineteenth century.

Many virtues were once ascribed to this stone; when worn it was held to be a preservative against epilepsy and other ailments. It was also valuable as a charm against evil spirits.

The crystals are simple in form; merely hexagonal prisms attached at one end to the matrix, with usually a flat face at right angles to its axis on the other end. They are invariably flawed, so much so that a "flawless emerald" has become a proverbial expression for unattainable perfection.

The largest single crystal, said to weigh nine and three-quarter ounces, is in possession of the Duke of Devonshire, but the National Museum at Washington has an excellent specimen from Stony Point, N. C., which weighs eight and three-quarter ounces, or more than 1,000 carats, and is the largest ever found in the United States.

JAPAN'S COST OF LIVING

As bearing upon the future trade relations and the commercial and industrial competition of the Japanese and American peoples, a recent study of the standard of living in Japan by Kokichi Morimoto, professor of economics in Tohoku Imperial University, published in the course of Johns Hopkins University studies, has some significance and interest in this country.

Professor Morimoto finds the cost of the standard diet of Japanese people, which is, however, better than the actual diet, to be 18.3 cents per day, while the cost of the suggested standard diet of Americans, which is less than the actual cost, is estimated at 28 cents per day, based on 1913 figures.

The actual diet of the Japanese small farmer or laborer costs 6 cents per day, and is largely made up of rice, barley, fish and vegetables. Relatively little meat is consumed in Japan. Japanese prisoners are fed at a cost of about 4 cents per day, and this is also the cost of a Japanese woman laborer's rations. The Japanese navy man is fed on beef, bread, barley, beans, vegetables, and has portions of sugar, vinegar and oil, at a cost of about 20 cents a day; the soldier's ration costs about 18 cents. The recommended standard diet of the urban dweller costs something like 16 cents per day in Tokio. The average weight of a Japanese is eight-tenths that of the average European; the food nutriment necessary to a Japanese is about 80 per cent that of a European.

In the "overheadcharge" of maintenance the American individual cost is, roughly, double that of the Japanese. For a family of five, two of the children girls, the clothing cost would be about $85 per year to those of moderate means, ranging to $150 per year for families in easy circumstances.

Among the city dwellers of larger income, father's silk overcoat costs $15, his shoes $1.25; a cotton overcoat costs about $5; his silk garment $4, and cotton garment about $3.

Mother's clothing costs about $100 per year, and her obi, or sash, at $25, is the greatest single expense; her silk haori costs $13, her topcoat $5, her shawl $1.30, umbrella, or parasol, $1.25, and handkerchiefs 30 cents; women's shoes, or clogs, cost perhaps $3.

However helpful the Japanese low cost of living may be in fixing the various standards of wages and costs of production, the statesmen of the empire believe the economic welfare of both individual and nation would be advanced by a greater home consumption. Japan's national wealth is about $400 per capita, while that of Great Britain is $1,500, the United States $1,250, and Germany $950. Japan needs wealth to secure its growing place in the world of business. Efficiency in production has increased ten to one hundred times; machine has replaced hand power, yet there has been no conspicuous advance in the use of wealth.

"The mass of the people," writes Professor Morimoto, "live in the same way as they did during the feudal régime. There should be improvements of such a kind that an efficient standard of living could be economically maintained, unless both production and consumption make parallel advancement the economic welfare of the individual as well as of the nation can never be expected to improve."

The recent flow of wealth to Japan by reason of the war business has enhanced values and no doubt raised the general standard of living somewhat above Professor Morimoto's estimates. But with Japan taking its place in the commerce and general trade relations of the world, its people must inevitably assume something like the common standard of expense of living.

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We want you to get one of our high-class suits, absolutely **Free**, so you can show it to your friends. It will be a big advertisement for us. If you have a little spare time, you can easily make from

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Dept. 374 CHICAGO

He Quit Cigarettes

Gained Over 30 Pounds

Mr. Ferguson's Experience

"I smoked cigarettes ever since a boy. From six to eight sacks of tobacco, I used weekly.

"**They were doing me great harm.** I became so nervous that I couldn't sleep until I smoked. Each morning I had an awful taste in my mouth.

"**Several times I tried to quit** by willpower, but it just seemed that I would go wild if I couldn't have cigarettes.

"I had almost given up hope of ever quitting until one day I sent for a book that told me what to do. After learning the way, I quit easily in 3 days and haven't touched a cigarette in years. I have gained over 30 pounds and cannot praise the method too highly. I say to every cigarette smoker -if you can't quit without help let Mr. Woods help you quit quickly and happily."- so says Mr. S. H. Ferguson of Crumps Park.

The foregoing remarks are like those of many other men who have been freed from the habit of smoking cigarettes, pipe or cigars or who have been chewing tobacco excessively.

Write at once to Mr. Edw. J. Woods, W A-101 Station F, New York, N. Y., and get his book. **It is free**; postpaid to you. Cut this out and show others.

$1 00 PANTS MADE TO MEASURE

Not $1.00, not even 50c, not one cent REAL cost to you under our easy conditions. **No extra charges** for extra big, extreme peg-tops, fancy belt loops, pearl buttons, no extra charge for anything, all free. Before you take another order, before you buy a suit or pants, get our samples and new offer. Write and say "**Send Me Your Offer**" the big, new different tailoring deal. Costs nothing and no extra charges.

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Get Thin This Summer

Why be miserable when you should rejoice at a steady reduction in weight with constant improvement in spirits. Instead of carrying a burden, become lithe, active and cheerful.

If you begin now and use oil of korein four times daily, also follow the simple directions, you should lose pound after pound of abnormal fat before the cold weather comes. Take ice-cream and candy if you like, and eat all you need. Look forward to better health, comfort, improved figure and other delightful benefits. Get a small box of oil of korein, in capsules, at the druggist's.

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The masterpiece of watch manufacture—adjusted to the second, positions, temperature and isochronism. Encased at factory into your choice of the exquisite new watch cases.

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All sizes for both men and women

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See handsome color illustrations of all the newest designs in watches that you have to choose from. Your name and address on a postcard is **enough.** Get this offer while it lasts. Write today.

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To the Wife of One Who Drinks

I have an important confidential message for you. It will come in a plain envelope. How to conquer the liquor habit in 3 days and make home happy. Wonderful, safe, lasting, reliable inexpensive method, guaranteed. Write to Edw. J. Woods, W B-101, Station F, New York, N. Y. Show this to others.

When Were YOU Born?

A Birthstone Ring for Any Month

BIRTHSTONE RINGS in Solid Gold Shell, warranted to wear and give satisfaction for Five Years, HIGHLY POLISHED and BEAUTIFULLY SET with the proper stone to designate the MONTH in which you were born—sent postpaid as per our Offer below.

JANUARY

By these who in this month are born
No gems save GARNETS should be worn;
They will insure you constancy,
True friendship and fidelity.

FEBRUARY

The February born will find
Sincerity and peace of mind;
Freedom from passion and from care,
If they the AMETHYST will wear.

MARCH

Who in this world of ours their eyes
In March first open shall be wise;
In days of peril firm and brave,
And wear a BLOODSTONE to their grave.

APRIL

Those who in April date their years,
DIAMONDS should wear, lest bitter tears
For vain repentance flow. This stone,
Emblem of innocence is known.

MAY

Who first beholds the light of day
In Spring's sweet flowery month of May,
And wears an EMERALD all her life,
Shall be a loved and happy wife.

JUNE

Who comes with Summer to this earth
And owes to June her day of birth,
With ring of PEARL upon her hand,
Can health, wealth and peace command.

Don't Fail to Take Advantage of this Great Ring Offer.

JULY

The glowing RUBY should adorn
Those who in warm July are born;
Thus will they be exempt and free
From loves, doubts and anxiety.

AUGUST

Wear a SARDONYX or for thee
No conjugal felicity.
The August born without this stone,
'Tis said must live unloved alone.

SEPTEMBER

A maiden born when Autumn's leaves
Are rustling in September's breeze,
A SAPPHIRE on her brow should bind,
'Twill cure diseases of the mind.

OCTOBER

October's child is born for woe
And life's vicissitudes must know;
But lay an OPAL on her breast,
And hope will lull the woes to rest.

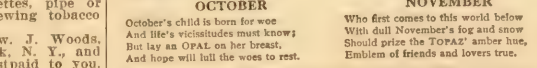
NOVEMBER

Who first comes to this world below
With dull November's fog and snow
Should prize the TOPAZ' amber hue,
Emblem of friends and lovers true.

DECEMBER

If cold December gave you birth,
The month of snow and ice and mirth,
Place on your hand a TURQUOISE blue,
Success will bless you if you do.

HOW TO GET RING SIZE



Take soft piece of thin wire or firm piece of paper and wind it tightly around the finger at the middle joint. Then measure by above scale and send us the number. Example—Place one end at O on the above scale. If the other end of wire or paper comes to 7 on the scale, No. 7 is your ring size for that finger. Remember to measure around the middle joint of the finger.

These Beautiful Rings are set in an up-to-date setting with a different stone for every month. You will notice the birthstone for January is Garnet, for February, Amethyst, for March, Bloodstone, etc. We know these rings will please you and give satisfaction.

We will send you one Free, post paid, if you send us an 18 months' subscription to THE GENTLEWOMAN for only 30c, which is the regular 18 months' subscription price to our great publication. The Ring is absolutely Free. Be sure to state the size of ring and the month in which you were born. **THE GENTLEWOMAN, 615 West 43d St., Dept. 276, New York**

YOU CAN LEARN SO EASY!

Become a Shorthand Writer in a Few Evenings

K I SHORTHAND

A girl soon learns to write by K. I. shorthand and may earn $10 to $25 weekly.

IF YOU can learn the lesson (at the right) within 5 minutes, you should learn the principles of K. I. SHORTHAND in 5 hours of spare time—after which acquire speed rapidly.

This is the perfected, **QUICK AND EASY METHOD.** If you wish to know how fast it is possible to write by K. I. Shorthand, ask somebody to read this whole advertisement rapidly within a few minutes by your watch. Thus you'll realize the speed with which you should write after pleasant practice.

Talk as fast as you like; I am taking it down in K. I. Shorthand.

TRY THIS LESSON

Here is *a* Just a tiny circle This is *t*

So here is *at* Here's *k*

act Spelled as pronounced *cat* (kat)

ng or *ing* *acting*

TO WRITE "ACTING" IN THE ORDINARY WAY REQUIRES 21 PEN MOVEMENTS—ONLY 4 IN THE PERFECTED AND SIMPLIFIED K. I. SHORTHAND.

See how easily you have learned to use four signs in K. I. SHORTHAND. Quickly, like a pastime, you can learn the whole set of 30 and then **attain speed** so you may write in a quarter to a tenth of the time needed for writing in the ordinary way. **Thus you may write as rapidly as the words are spoken.**

Hindrances of old systems eliminated; no shading; no bother about positions on, over or under ruled lines—and you can read your own notes readily after months or years. Hence K. I. Shorthand is valuable for private notes, messages, etc.

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We give you a complete correspondence course, relatively worth fifty dollars, for only $5. One-tenth the usual cost, ten times easier to learn. You'll be surprised and delighted with K. I. Shorthand.

We guarantee you can learn or your money refunded; one month's trial allowed. Mail the full price, only $5; or you may send $1 and pay the rest ($4) when the course comes to you; or write for our **FREE BROCHURE** with proofs. Do not miss this opportunity of a lifetime. To learn K. I. Shorthand will add to your efficiency and earning ability, also to the pleasure of your life. Write, or use coupon below, for free Brochure or for enrollment. Remit by cash, money-order or check. Mention this publication. Address New York or Chicago office, whichever is nearer.

Try These K. I. Shortcuts

Association
This word takes 34 pen movements in ordinary writing—only 2 in K. I. Shorthand. See how many times you can write it while your friend writes in the usual way.

Notwithstanding
Takes 54 movements in longhand; only 3 in K. I. Shorthand. The whole method is surprisingly easy to learn.

Representative
Takes 41 movements in longhand; only 2 in K. I. Shorthand. Learners, all ages, are delighted with their quickly attained speed.

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..... EA-101

FAT IS FATAL

How To Get Rid of Burdensome Adiposity

Become Thin Now

All physicians know that excessive fatness is contrary to health. An overstout person who does not reduce his or her weight usually dies ten to forty years sooner than Nature intended. This is due to **pressure of fat around the heart** and other vital organs, or to hardening of the arteries caused by the habits of the obese, or other reason attributable to obesity. Clear evidence of this is shown in the attitude of the life-insurance companies, which nowadays refuse to insure those who are in excess of a certain weight proportionate to their height. The obvious reason is that such overweight persons are not expected to live long. **You never see elderly fat people.** Enough said! Therefore IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH and lengthen your life by reducing your weight through Korein System. **Begin with Oil of Korein now!**

Improve Your Appearance

Do not continue to appear unattractive in consequence of a needless load of fat. You may easily look several years younger and otherwise more pleasing in appearance if you follow the Korein System faithfully for a while, eliminating thereby the **inconvenient load of obesity.** Let your chin lose its heavy folds and become clearly defined like that in a statue. Let your pursy abdomen, flabby arms, overweighted hips or chest, drooping face and neck flesh gradually disappear so that you become well proportioned. Then you will realize in how much higher esteem you are held by all. You will find a new cause of satisfaction every day while you are getting the unhealthy fat out of your body—to remain away forever. Each day, as you take your measurements and view yourself in the mirror, **you will find pleasure in your improving appearance.** You'll be cheered, too, by the voluntary remarks of friends who are likely to tell you that you seem to be **growing younger all the time!**

Improve Your Efficiency

You can do far more work, and do it better, when you have begun to reduce your weight. You will be **so pleased at the clearness of your mind** and at your increasing activity of body that cheerfulness will take the place of those spells of moroseness that have interfered with your progress. Beginning in the morning, you'll move around in a sprightly way, filled with cheerfulness. Instead of sighing over the tying of your shoes, you'll be able to stand on one foot while holding the other high enough to enable you to tie the shoestring—or you'll stoop over readily. Throughout the day things will move along smoothly. **Your peevishness will be a condition of the past**—and everybody around you will be glad of it. In efficiency you will improve wonderfully. And EFFICIENCY LEADS TO PROSPERITY. So do not delay beginning with the Korein System.

Reduce Weight Happily

You see in the upper illustration two pictures. The smaller one shows a woman as she now is. Being overstout, she lulls herself into a mistaken idea of contentment by taking no part in the activities of life. She affects to have no interest for herself in lively pastimes, although she smilingly looks upon others of her sex. Secretly she is envious.

In the larger section of the same illustration you see the healthy, buoyant condition that this same woman might be in if she were to follow the Korein System for a while. Her health would be wonderfully better. Her figure would be nearer normal. She would appear several years younger. Her agility would surprise everybody. Isn't this an improvement worth striving for? Of course it is.

In the illustration of the business man we see in the small corner picture the stodgy, bull-necked individual as he is. Life is a burden. He has very little real satisfaction in business and must content himself with stupid forms of pleasure. He has not many years to live—if he continues a victim of needlessly excessive overstoutness.

In the larger view we see the same man as he should appear after a course of Korein System. It is a pleasure for him to attend to business now. He enjoys his recreation, for it has now become one of keen zest for him. He will live many years longer than if he had not eliminated the unhealthy fat which was pressing upon his vital organs. **It is so easy to follow Korein System,** and the benefits are so many and so pronounced that any sensible overstout man will heed the monition of his judgment.

WARNING

Most druggists sell Oil of Korein or will obtain it upon order. Do not accept a substitute; far better await the arrival of Oil of Korein. There is absolutely **no thyroid or pulsatilla in Oil of Korein.** Ours is perfectly safe and the directions for the Korein System, which are an essential feature, are easy to follow. If you do not buy at the druggist's you may easily **order by mail,** using the form below. **We give $100.00 guarantee.**

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KOREIN COMPANY, Inc. (Dept. R A-101),
Station F, New York, N. Y.

Date.....191.....

Please send me, postpaid, in plain package (1 Box Oil of Korein), for which one dollar is enclosed. This order is sent under your guarantee.

Name and full postal address.....

.....

RA-101

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